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62nd year of publication

Kosovo's declaration of independence draws mixed reaction

Harry der Nederlanden

Kosovo's declaration of independence on Sunday, Feb. 17 has not been greeted with enthusiasm everywhere. When the countries of Africa were moving toward independence, the going slogan was still the self-determination of peoples. But nowadays many countries and thinkers are more concerned about national sovereignty and their territorial integrity.

Two opposing forces seem to be at work: globalization, which seems to erase all boundaries, and ethnic identity, which seems intent on creating more boundaries.

The U.S. has long supported Kosovo's aspiration to independence, and most European nations are expected to follow suit in recognizing Kosovo as a republic. They may not be enthusiastic about it but see no way of going back to the former arrangement with Serbs lording it over the region.

But many other countries – Russia most emphatically – denounced Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence as contrary to international law. Although Kosovo is under the jurisdiction of the U.N., the U.N. never approved its overture for independence from Serbia. As part of the Security Council, Russia blocked every move in that direction.

But other countries, too, were critical of the move, arguing that it might well set a precedent for other separatist groups to demand independence. Russia has at least two such regions – the Georgian republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – that have been agitating for independence. Spain also had objections, for it, too, has two ethnic groups that have long been seeking independence from Spain, most notably the Basques, who have their own militant wing.

Canada has not recognized Kosovo either, some say at least in part because it might strengthen the case for Quebec separatists.

ANDY NELSON

Pushed out: One million people fled Kosovo in 1999 to escape Serbia's ethnic cleansing. Here ethnic Albanians wait at the Morina border crossing to Albania.

Numerous commentators seized the occasion to berate the EU for its lack of a unified foreign policy and/or NATO for the policies that brought about this situation almost 20 years ago.

George Jonas of the *National Post* blames the wooly-headedness of the Boomer generation for intervening in Kosovo in 1989. They had dreams, he claims, of creating a happy multicultural society in which Serbs and Albanians would live peacefully side by side. After decades of conflict between the two groups, I doubt that either Europe or the U.S. (Clinton) took the radical step of bombing the Serbs in hopes of creating a model multicultural society. It was intervene or see an entire population of nearly one million people turned into refugees or worse.

After the declaration of independence both Serbia's and Kosovo's leaders have pledged that they will not use violence to achieve their ends. Serbs living in Kosovo, said Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, former commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army, will have the right to run their own municipalities, have their own churches, their own schools, hospitals and police force; they will be able to retain their own language and use it in the courts. This is considerably more than the Serbs accorded the Albanian Kosovars, even though they comprised over 90 percent of the population. Whether the new government will protect, or be able to protect, the rights of the Serb minority is another question, of course. But for the time being a UN contingent will keep the peace. At present there are 16,000 NATO and over 1500 U.S. troops in Kosovo.

But even with the presence of so many peacekeepers, it has not always been easy to keep the two from striking out at one another. Little wonder that there were retaliatory attacks on the Serb minority in the province. During the military action that was labeled ethnic cleansing in 1989, some 10,000 Albanian Kosovars were killed and many more saw their homes put to the torch. At one point about half the population was forced to flee.

After the NATO bombing of the Serbs and the return of the Albanians, there were many acts of reprisal. Serbian homes and churches

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China speaks out on Darfur crisis

Keen not to taint Olympics, and under pressure from West, Beijing sends envoy to Khartoum with strong words.

Scott Baldauf, Peter Ford and Laura J. Winter

JOHANNESBURG, BEIJING; AND LONDON – For much of the five-year conflict in Sudan's Darfur region, Khartoum has counted on the silent support of its most important trading partner, China. While Western diplomats and human rights groups pressured China to exert its influence to halt the fighting, which has killed more than 200,000, Beijing seemed unmoved.

This week, however, China has gone on the diplomatic offensive, opening up about past efforts and future plans. Just days after Hollywood director Steven Spielberg resigned as an artistic director of the 2008 Beijing Olympics – accusing Beijing of not doing enough to stop the Darfur crisis – China sent its special envoy on Darfur, Liu Guijin, to Khartoum Sunday, both to deliver a stern warning to the Sudanese government, and to remind its Western critics that they, too, could be doing more to stop the fighting.

At a stopover in London, which one analyst described as a "public relations roadshow," Mr. Liu told a crowd of diplomats and China experts at Chatham House, a prominent foreign-affairs institute, that China has been "forced" to take open action on Darfur. "According to our original culture, we do a lot of things quietly," he said. "We do not like to speak everywhere. But the situation has forced me to speak out on what we have done and what we are going to do."

China's change of tactics, from quiet behind-the-scenes diplomacy to more public speechmaking, could be motivated by many factors, from a desire to maintain its paramount influence in Sudan to a need to protect its upcoming Summer Olympics. Whatever the motivations, China's diplomatic initiative carries risks and raises questions of how much influence China really has with its African allies.

"Definitely, China has found the need to play the role of global actor," says Mariam Jooma, a Sudan expert at the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria (or Tshwane, as the South African capital city now calls itself). Mr. Spielberg's action may have sped up Beijing's diplomacy, but China looks at Sudan in much broader terms than mere public relations.

"To the west of Sudan, the Chadian rebels have been pushed back, in part with French military assistance," says Ms. Jooma. "To the south, the SPLM [Sudanese People's Liberation Movement] is hedging its bets by signing up the US as a major ally. So for strategic reasons, China is beginning to feel the need to send a message that it is quite a big player in Sudan."

As if to underscore how important the Darfur issue has become, America's envoy arrived in Khartoum

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Kenyan rivals agree to share power

Kofi Annan's persistence yields a power-sharing deal between Kenya's President Kibaki and opposition leader Raila Odinga.

Scott Baldauf and Rob Crilly

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa; and Nairobi, Kenya – After weeks of rancorous negotiations to resolve a postelection conflict that killed nearly 1,500 people, Kenya's two rival parties signed an agreement on power-sharing Thursday.

Under the agreement, President Mwai Kibaki will retain the position of president, although international observers and Kenya's own election commission have declared his election deeply flawed. Opposition leader Raila Odinga will become prime minister, although his powers are decidedly ceremonial.

The pact does not address such key issues as a new Constitution, land redistribution, and human rights violations. But with it, Kenya appears to be turning the corner toward a tentative peace. Now begins the work of making politicians set aside rivalries and greed to form a unity government and to urge ethnic communities that have massacred each other to make amends.

"We believe by these steps we come together in the spirit of partnership to bring peace and prosperity to the people of Kenya who so richly deserve it," said a visibly relieved Kofi Annan, the former UN secretary-general, who led the four-week-long mediation effort in Nairobi.

He urged hard-liners on both sides to accept the agreement. "To those people in Kenya I would say this: Compromise was necessary for the survival of this country. Support this agreement for it is the key to unity of Kenya."

Kenyans fleeing (above) *Kenyan refugee camp (below)*

Under the deal, the president and prime minister will each nominate one deputy prime minister. The prime minister and the deputies can be removed only if parliament casts a vote of no confidence. The cabinet will be based on parties' representation in parliament. The agreement must be ratified by parliament, which Kibaki has ordered to meet on March 6 to start reviewing the accord.

Reaction in the streets of Nairobi was first one of relief, and in some places, elation. "We thought there would be more antagonism, more chaos, but I think the deal happened today because people are tired," says Ole Surum, a youth leader for the Youth Employment Network in the slum of Kibera. "People are not supposed to fight one another. If this deal didn't happen, there would have been a disaster."

Despite its weaknesses, the power-sharing pact is a step forward, especially after nearly two months of violence that displaced 300,000 and left East Africa's driving economic force in tatters.

"This crisis was over power, so now that they have agreed to share power, it's over," says Ahmed Nasir Abdullah, a political analyst in Nairobi and former head of the Law Society of Kenya.

While Mr. Abdullah says that the deal is still more favorable to the president, since the powers of the prime minister are merely to "supervise and coordinate" the cabinet, he says that both sides are likely to hew to the current deal now. "I think that basically with the way the power-sharing agreement was formed on the way forward – in dealing with human rights and the need to reform the Constitution – both partners are intending to go about this on the same wavelength."

Kenya's political crisis began Dec. 27, after a deeply flawed presidential election gave Mwai Kibaki the presidency. But the roots of the conflict go back much further, to the early days of Kenya's liberation from British colonial rule. Longstanding resentment over politicians giving land and contracts to their ethnic groups and families, and the charges of opposition politicians who said that President Kibaki would continue that tradition with a second term, were just the spark to set off a firestorm of violence and ethnic hate.

The power-sharing agreement may be the crucial starting point toward peace, but it is perhaps the easiest step. Many analysts anticipate greater difficulty in the days ahead, as the new Kenyan government of national unity takes up the more contentious issues, such as rewriting the Kenyan constitution, balancing the distribution of wealth and land ownership, reining in politically connected militias, and punishing those persons who have instigated or promoted ethnic violence.

"The danger here is that people will say we have an agreement, so let's carry on with our lives," says Jacqueline Klopp, a political scientist and Kenya expert at Columbia University. "The politicians have their agreement, but their militias and their supporters have not demobilized. Until we have some peace-building, some recognition that what we did was wrong, people are not going to just start going back to Eldoret."

The town of Eldoret, in the Rift Valley, was the site of some of the most horrific violence of the conflict, including the burning of a church that was sheltering ethnic Kikuyu villagers from the armed crowds of Kalenjin neighbors. During the election, most Kenyans voted along ethnic lines, with Kikuyus supporting their fellow tribesman, Kibaki, and ethnic Luos, Kalenjins, and others supporting opposition leader Mr. Odinga.

François Grignon, Africa director of the International Crisis Group, says the agreement was an important step forward and would help ease tension in the Rift Valley. But he warned that there it would take a lot more work to heal Kenya's ethnic and social divisions.

"The implementation of all the agreements is the key issue," he says. "Consultation with community leaders to craft a realistic process of reconciliation is going to be very important."

In some ways, the fact that Kenya's deal took so much effort and time to hammer out is a testament to how much power the international community – including the United Nations – can have.

"Kenya was so close to dissolving," says Ms. Klopp. "That very fact shows how the concerted effort, the real support of the international community, can make a difference. We can never say again that there is nothing to be done."

Scott Baldauf is a staff writer and Rob Crilly a correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor. *Freelance reporter Muchiri Kioi contributed to this story from Nairobi.*

Kenyan churches welcome agreement to end post-election crisis

Fredrick Nzwili

Nairobi (ENI) – Church leaders in Kenya have welcomed the announcement of a power-sharing agreement between President Mwai Kibaki and opposition leader Raila Odinga as an important step to ending a two-month political crisis in the east African country.

"It is good news for Kenya," the Rev. Peter Karanja, general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Kenya, told ENI on February 28. "Any agreement signed between the top two portends good and peace for the country. It is a framework for starting the work on the real issues," Karanja said.

Celebrations broke out in towns across the country after a televised ceremony showed Kibaki and Odinga signing the agreement, and shaking hands with former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan, who brokered the deal.

"Let the spirit of healing begin. Let it begin now," said Annan after presiding at the signing ceremony. "I want Kenyans to know compromise was necessary for this country. I urge Kenyans to support this agreement. The spirit of partnership is needed to bring peace and prosperity to the people of Kenya."

Anglican Bishop Gideon Ireri of Mbeere said Kenyans were eager to return to their normal lives. "It will give us a break from the violence and the chaos," he said, though he suggested that a constitutional conference might also be required to guard against ad-hoc agreements between parties.

Religious leaders from different faiths held a national day of prayer earlier in February, at which they admitted they shared culpability for Kenya's calamitous state of affairs because they were caught up in ethnic divisions that had polarised the country after the elections.

News

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on the same day that Liu arrived. Both conducted separate talks with the Sudanese government.

"China has been pushing the Sudan government behind the scenes for at least two years now," says Alex De Waal, a Sudan expert at Harvard University. "They were a driving force behind the hybrid force of UN and AU [African Union} peacekeepers," which began to deploy in Sudan last month, "and it has been doing this before there even was an activist campaign over Darfur."

The combined attentions of human rights campaigners and Hollywood stars such as Mia Farrow, Don Cheadle, George Clooney, and now Spielberg may make bigger news in the United States than in Beijing, but activists have had a surprisingly stinging effect nonetheless. Beijing's response has come out sounding hurt rather than angry. But the very fact that it has responded at all is a big change.

"It is understandable if [critics] are not familiar with China's policy," Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao said last week. He said China had played "a positive and constructive role in the proper solution of the issue" and that "China's important role in the process is widely applauded by the international community."

Since envoy Liu was appointed last May, apparently signaling a shift from Beijing's previous diplomatic support for Khartoum's stonewalling, US, British, and UN officials have welcomed what they say are behind-the-scenes efforts by the Chinese to pressure the Sudanese authorities.

This month, Liu reportedly told Sudan's Foreign Minister, Deng Alor, that "the world is running out of patience with what is going on in Darfur." He urged Sudan not to take actions that would "cause the international community to impose sanctions on them."

As Sudan's major trade partner, buying nearly three-quarters of its oil exports, and also selling large arms shipments to Sudan, China is thought to have special influence in Khartoum.

Liu's expected mission is to parade China's achievements in Sudan and de-link the Darfur conflict from the Olympic Games.

"I think they've realized this level of criticism is really damaging to their image," said Kerry Brown, an associate fellow at Chatham House. "In the early 1990s they wouldn't have [cared]. But now they are so nervous about the Olympics, we actually might see them do something new."

Liu's trip this weekend to Sudan, his fourth since he got the job, has a dual purpose, says He Wenping, an Africa expert at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a government-run think tank in Beijing. "The first goal is to keep things moving towards a solution of the Darfur issue because there have been a lot of delays," she says. "The government also intends to depoliticize the Olympics," she adds. "They do not want Darfur hanging over the Olympics."

Dr. He does not expect international pressure to change what she says is China's preference for diplomatic efforts, rather than such tactics as sanctions against Khartoum. "I don't think the pressure will lead to a dramatic U-turn," she says. "But it has had some influence. As the pressure mounts, of course the government has to respond" with "active measures" such as Liu's visit to Sudan.

International pressure has changed China's approach to the Darfur crisis before, says Chris Alden, an expert on Sino-African relations at the London School of Economics. "From a public defense of Sudan" until 2004, Beijing has "shifted in the UN Security Council to successfully getting Khartoum to accept an international peacekeeping force," he says.

But pressure from the West and nongovernmental organizations was not necessarily the driving force, Dr. Alden suggests. Rather, the increasingly obvious frustration among African leaders with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir's government (denying him the AU presidency two years in a row, and sending in an AU intervention force) was "more important," he says.

Beijing "could either be seen as going against the grain of African opinion, or getting in line with the African position, and they got in line," Alden suggests.

The new wave of pressure, however, is unlikely to significantly alter Beijing's approach, predicts Alden. "It seems they will stick to their guns against sanctions, but say they are open to any other form of pressure."

But while the Spielberg resignation may sting, some analysts say it merely points to larger problems with China's foreign policy.

"The Spielberg dilemma is a reaction to an even bigger dilemma," says Alexander Neill, head of the Royal United Services Institute's Asia Security Program. "It's a grander issue. It's linked to the party and to patriotism, and nationalism, and it's showing. China has to re-evaluate as a global stakeholder just how it becomes involved with countries that have civil war issues, internecine struggles, regimes that are unpalatable to its neighbors or the West.

"It is going to need some tweaking, because its policy of non-interference is wearing a bit thin."

Scott Baldauf & Peter Ford are staff writers of The Christian Science Monitor, *& Laura J. Winter is a correspondent.*

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were burnt and about 200,000 left the province. About 100,000 Serbs still make their homes in Kosovo, mostly in ethnic enclaves.

As it goes into the future as an independent state, Kosovo has a lot to overcome. It is the poorest region in Europe, with an unemployment rate of 60 percent and a ruined infrastructure. Organized crime is a huge problem as is corruption, but that is, at least partly, a function of a collapsed economy and its uncertain status. Kosovo's leaders are hoping that independence will bring investment and new business into the country. But it will be a slow process, say the pundits, and the people may be approaching their newfound status with expectations that are too high.

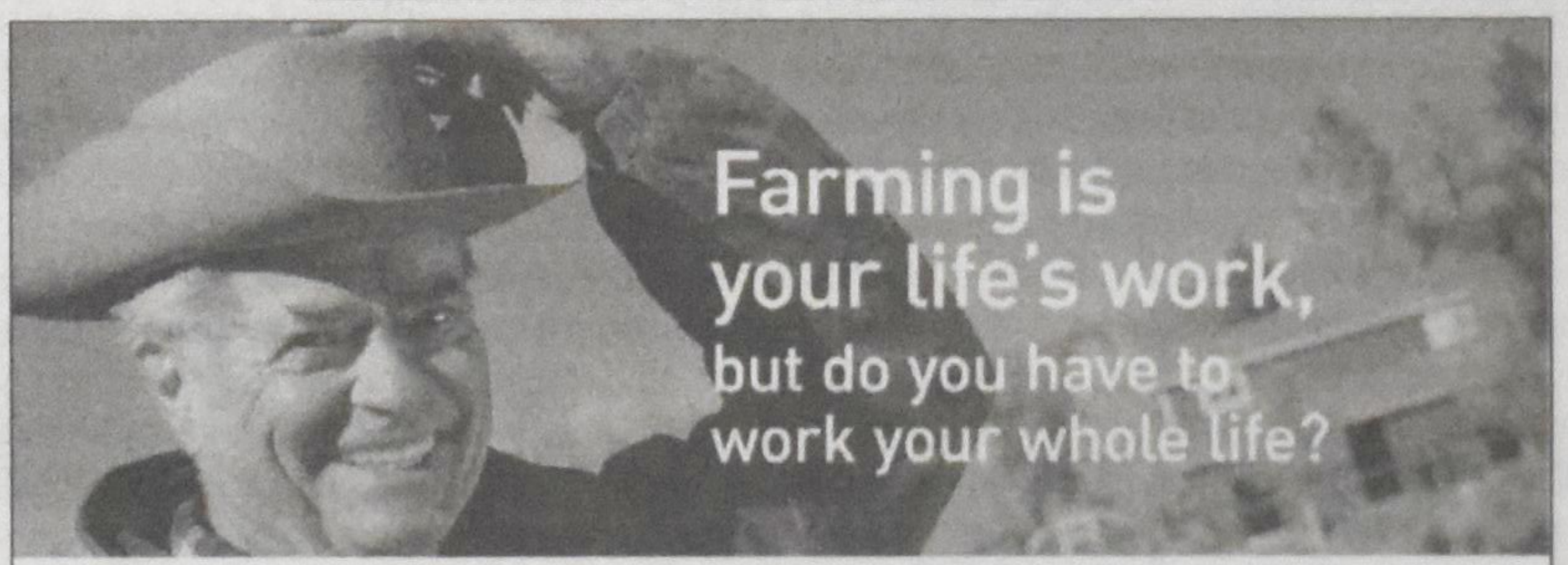
Kosovo is quite unlike most other cases of restive ethnic groups that are part of some larger nation. When it was part of Yugoslavia before that country began breaking up, Kosovo had considerable autonomy. Despite the Serb furor that it is their heartland, the truth is that Albanians have been the majority there for hundreds of years. Only in 1912 did Serbia begin reoccupying Kosovo. After the Second World War, it became part of Yugoslavia along with the republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro and Macedonia. Under Tito Kosovo acquired the same status as Serbia.

The independence of Kosovo is less a matter of sundering off a province from a sovereign Serbia; it is the result of the disintegration of Yugoslavia after the death of Tito. This disintegration has resulted in the creation of five other republics.

The escalating conflicts between the Serbs and Albanian Kosovars were the direct result of Slobodan Milosovic's assertion of Serbian pride and nationalism and his attempt to impress that upon the Kosovars. In 1989 he unilaterally abolished Kosovo's autonomous status and deprived the people of their language rights; he shut down their newspapers, sent in his own police force, fired university professors and other professionals – all in an attempt to dominate and assimilate a population with a different culture. When that failed, he embarked on his program of "ethnic cleansing" that saw half the region turned into refugees fleeing for their lives.

Even apart from questions of history and legality, practically speaking there was no way that the Albanian Kosovars were going to submit once again to Serbian domination. Negotiators worked with both sides for about two years without convincing either side to compromise. Frank Wisner, U.S. Special Envoy for Kosovo, called the move to independence a "just outcome."

It will be that, of course, only if both sides keep to their pledge of non-violence and the fledgling government can live up to its pledge to honor the rights of Serbs living in the country. And that is a huge "if".



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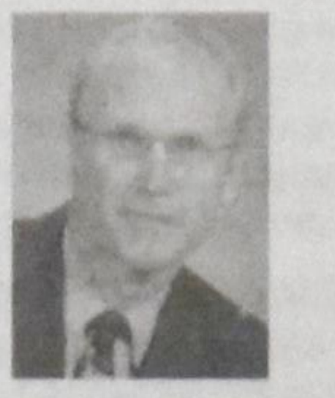

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Editorial

Examining our neo-Calvinist DNA

Harry der Nederlanden

Among church-going people this has become an era of humility, self-examination and confession. We are acutely aware that the church in the past, our own congregations and we individually haven't exactly done an exemplary job of representing the good news of Jesus Christ – not in our personal piety and not in our efforts to better the world. Various denominations and ecumenical organizations have felt it necessary to apologize for things done in the past – and here "apologize" decidedly doesn't mean to defend but to say "I'm sorry" and to beg forgiveness.

Reformed believers talk a lot about such character blots as our triumphalism, dogmatism, intellectualism, and our bland, mashed potatoes spirituality. We get spicy and hot, it is said, only when it comes to defending our familiar toolbox of doctrines against Catholics, Arminians and other benighted fellow-Christians.

We've all heard these and similar charges. And looking back we have to admit that they're not without foundation. So we're ready and willing to beat our breasts and cry, "Mea culpa!" (my fault).

But before we take responsibility for everything that's tossed at our heads, we have to do some genuine self-examination. We have to ask whether it is true and how far it is true. How many triumphalists have you met lately? How hard have our preachers and theologians been hammering on dogmas, like the Five Points of Calvinism? And how widespread is a stress on the importance of head knowledge over spirituality, fellowship and acceptance? I suspect that most of us, and our church communities, are aware of these failings and have long been striving to overcome such weaknesses and imbalances.

Must we assume that they are weaknesses? In the past these traits were often seen as strengths. Perhaps it's only the influence of our "therapeutic culture" that now induces us to see them as weaknesses. Then, too, perhaps in a different time and culture they actually were strengths, strengths we no longer need, at least not to the same extent.

In a recent discussion, someone who had abandoned the Reformed tradition charged that Reformed people learned to be contentious and intolerant toward those with differing beliefs from John Calvin, who was a sharp polemicist. He was seldom gracious and gentle in his debates. He used his keen intellect to cut them and their arguments to shreds. There is nothing Christlike in the way Calvin dealt with his opponents, said the critic.

He has a point. Though it must be said in Calvin's defense that his style of polemics were typical of the time. That was how debate was taught in the schools in those days: give no quarter, take no prisoners. But it was undoubtedly true that while Calvin may have been reformed in the content of his thinking, the reformation of his style needed work.

Have we inherited Calvin's pugnacious style? Is it part of our DNA? I doubt it. If so, we are quickly undergoing a sea change.

When I first went to college in the U.S., one of the differences I noticed between Reformed Christians in the U.S. and our immigrant churches in Canada was that Dutch-Canadians were much more blunt and quick to confront. Americans were more polite and gracious. At first I appreciated the kinder attitude. But after a while I wasn't sure whether it was genuine, or whether their smiles were just a way to humor a Canadian fool. I began to long for a bit more of that Dutch-Canadian directness. On the other hand, I couldn't help remembering some rather nasty quarrels that could have been avoided with a little tact.

Today we all focus much more on the how of embodying Christian truth than on the doctrinal content. I think that's probably an improvement. The Christian schools had to go through a similar transition. First they focused almost solely on the content of the curriculum. Then they realized that the how of teaching it was just as important.

In the latest issue of *Perspective: a journal of Reformed thought*, someone who once counted himself among the "neo-Calvinists" exposes some of its character flaws. I think there is a great deal of truth to his observations and that they are helpful in our self-examination. They may not touch on your or my personal failings, but perhaps they say something about the DNA we have inherited.

The first thing Steve Mathonnet-Vander Well touches on is the Kuyperian influence on the political thinking of American evangelicals. Neo-Calvinists urged Christians to become involved in politics and culture as part of God's good creation, not "worldly" things to be avoided. Evangelicals listened. Kuyper is "in". The mindset that emerged was an attitude that claimed to be able to get at the roots of societal ills. Our creation-order theology, he suggests, predisposes us to leap too easily from confessional statements to public policies. Moreover, it renders us especially vulnerable to the corrosive effects of political power and the seductions of middle-class liberal society. In short, Steve suggests that the Kuyperian tradition had the effect of making evangelicals overconfident about their own wisdom on political issues and thus set them up for a fall.

Neo-Calvinist have also contributed to a denigration of the role of the church in the Christian life. The theme that redemption is about restoring God's creational intentions encourages them to think that they have too many answers that others do not. This makes them more backward-looking than forward looking. But the Christian life is more eschatological (future-oreinted) than it is restorative.

This backward-looking stance has tended to make Kuyperians conservative, more eager to hang on to what is than to seek change. They are tempted simply to anoint what has been accomplished as rooted in the creation order. A future-looking perspective would tend to be more open and less certain that this or that in our present landscape is part of God's future.

Steve's last point is that we see Jesus too much as "The Fixer". Creation has become derailed and Jesus' mission is to restore it to its original ends. But this does not do justice to the person and work of Christ.

Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell's analysis does, I think, touch on weaknesses of neo-Calvinism or perhaps, better put, on the temptations of any attempt to think, act and speak as Christians in the whole of life and society. However, my experience with that tradition beginning in Canada and under Evan Runner jars with some things he says. In the 60s and 70s Kuyperian enthusiasts were seldom accused of being too backward looking or conservative. In fact, their visions of a wholly different future society (probably influenced by student radicalism of the time) tended toward a almost revolutionary attitude. We had this blueprint for a better social and political order very much at odds with the status quo, and we looked for quick ways to hammer the existing order into conformity with our – biblical – vision of how things ought to be.

In many ways, the eschatological emphasis was once very strong in Kuyperian circles. Almost everyone read Herman Ridderbos's *The Coming of the Kingdom* (or at least pretended they had read it). "Transformationalist" activism, at first, was not first of all motivated by an expectation that a few neo-Calvinist could radically transform the whole of Canadian or American society and culture, but simply by the conviction that if you're going to do something meaningful in this world, it has to be in harmony with God's purposes. Most of those Kuyperian immigrants to Canada had very modest expectations about what they could actually achieve, but they knew they were not responsible for constructing the Kingdom here on earth. They were simply called to erect signposts to that now and coming Kingdom. The rest was up to God himself.

No doubt they sometimes were too quick to think that they knew what God required of us and of our fellow citizens. But Kuyperians also used to warn each other and evangelicals that one could not directly apply biblical directives to a complex, diversified society. That was precisely the point of creation order and sphere sovereignty. These emphasized that we had to understand different realms like family, school and state before we could begin to "apply" biblical precepts. In different creational contexts they have different implications.

It is true that the enthusiasm of many Reformational turks made them too eager to expound on solutions to a host of complex problems. They should have been more reticent, more humble. But is this part of the neo-Calvinist DNA or is it conservatism? Perhaps neither is necessarily part of that tradition, but both are temptations that stalk any and all forms of Christian activity.

Part of the Reformational version of Kuyper did indeed say critical things of the centrality of the church. But it was not to denigrate the church or deny its uniqueness; it was to challenge the comfortable notion that church and home were the totality of the Christian life. However, when theologians began defending the slogan that the church was there only for the world and that the church had to be turned inside out (in the 60s J.C. Hoekendijk authored a book titled *The Church Inside Out*), Kuyperians were quick to insist there was more to the church than that. So a strong critique of a devaluation of the church by some Kuyperians came from fellow Kuyperians.

As I reflect on Steve's analysis of our neo-Calvinist DNA, the picture becomes complicated by contradictions. I wonder to what extent he has put his finger on peculiarly Calvinist traits, or whether these are to a large extent common to many streams of Christianity struggling with the question of: How do we live a life of witness in modern Western society?

To read Steve Mathonnet-VanderWell's essay and Nick Wolerstorff's response, see: http://www.rca.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?pid=3605

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Canada

Opinion

Christianity and Islam: What common ground? Part I

The clash of cultures between Christianity and Islam dates back to Muhammad.... The clash is not just a matter of dissimilar cultures. Many Muslims and Christians do not know what they themselves believe. Consequently, their reactions are improper since their information is inaccurate. Confusion through politically correct ecumenism and relativism has prolonged ignorance.

(Ergun M. Caner and Emir F. Caner, *Unveiling Islam*, Kregel Publications, 2002, p. 202.)

Harry Antonides

The "Open Letter and Call from Muslim Religious Leaders" to the heads of Christian churches everywhere, sent on October 13, 2007 probably touched very few Christians in the pews. Just another highfalutin discussion about arcane matters of theology, they might have thought if they knew or thought about it at all.

However, this letter deserves the careful attention of every Christian believer for a number of reasons. It tells us a great deal about the state of Muslim-Christian relations today, a topic that is, or should be, of interest to everyone. The responses from Christian leaders also reveal some important things about the state of Christianity.

A gesture of goodwill?

This letter referred to as "A Common Word Between Us and You" (Koran, 3: 64) was addressed by name to 27 church officials, beginning with Pope Benedict VXI, and including the Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

The opening (summary) explains that the theme of this "Common Word" is the recognition that Muslims and Christians make up more than half of the world's population, and therefore the future of the world depends on peace between these two faith communities.

Much of their letter is devoted to showing that on the basis of the Muslim and Christian scriptures the two religions have in common the foundation for peace in this twofold principle: "love of the one God and love of the neighbour." Among other sources, they mention the Koran, 3:64, and the Bible, Mark 12:29-31.

They assure Christians that they, too, recognize Jesus as the Messiah, though not in the same way as Christians do, but as mentioned in the Koran 4:171 – while pointing out that Christians themselves never all agreed about Jesus Christ's true nature. They write:

As Muslims, we say to Christians that we are not against them and that Islam is not against them – so long as they do not wage war against Muslims on account of their religion, oppress them and drive them out of their homes....

So let our differences not cause hatred and strife between us. Let us vie with each other only in righteousness and good works. Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill....

What do we make of this invitation that on the surface is a gesture of goodwill and friendship of one major world religion to another? How can we refuse to accept such a gesture? Are we not all in favour of peace and goodwill?

There are two serious problems with this letter. In the first place, it gives a biased and incomplete reading of the Koran and the other scriptures of Islam. Secondly, it ignores the history of intolerance and violence of Islam as well as the present state of Christian-Muslim relations in countries where Islam is the ruling ideology.

Let the Koran speak

First of all, the authors present only those sections of the Koran that mention goodwill towards the people of the Book (Jews and Christians). In doing so, they fail to mention that the Koran (and the hadith) is severe in rejecting what orthodox (in distinction from liberal) Christians consider to be the heart of the biblical revelation. Central in this revelation are the teachings about the Trinity, the nature of Christ, salvation by grace, the authority of the Bible, the distinction between church/mosque and state, freedom of religion, and a host of other issues that derive from these starting points.

The letter writers assure us that they honour Christ as an important apostle. However, they deny the heart of historic biblical religion, namely, that Christ is one with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, who took on our human nature to be the Mediator between a holy and just God and us sinful human beings.

This mystery of divine love is beyond our understanding, but to deny its truth is to deny the heart of the Christian faith. Christ himself is clear on that, and so are the New Testament epistles. As St. Paul stresses throughout all his writings: If Christ did not die and rise again, our faith is in vain. (See, e.g., 1 Cor. 15:12-19)

In other words, what this "common word" really amounts to is telling Christians that we should ignore what lies at the core of our faith and embrace the Muslim understanding of the love of God and of the neighbour. Can you imagine what would happen if Christians would begin a discussion with Muslims by telling them that they should set aside their belief in the Koran and in the prophet Muhammad because their understanding of both is seriously flawed?

To rightly evaluate the opinions expressed in this Muslim letter, we need to have some idea of what the Koran says about the nature of the Christian faith. Following are a few key Koranic verses which are clear in condemning that which concerns the heart of the Christian faith.

The Koran states that Jesus was no more than an apostle and that "God forbid that He should have a son" (4:171), that it is a falsehood and a "monstrous blasphemy" to believe that Jesus is the Son of God (18: 4,5; 19:88), that such believers are cursed and "shall forfeit their souls"(11:18-21), and that they "imitate the infidels of old. God confound them! How perverse they are!" (9.30)

What about freedom of religion

The letter states at the outset that the words in the Koran "that none of us shall take others for lords beside God, mean 'that none of us should obey the other in disobedience to what God has commanded,' This relates to the Second Commandment because justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part of love of the neighbour." (pp. 2-3)

In this connection they quote the well-known verse from the Koran "Let there be no compulsion in religion." (2:256) But this claim must be tested against other instructions in the Islamic scriptures and its practices, which clearly have trumped ("abrogated") this freedom verse. Following are a few such verses that are considered authoritative and unchangeable by the mainstream Muslims whom these leaders purport to represent.

When the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and turn to prayer, allow them to go their way. God is forgiving and merciful. (9:5)

Fight against such as those to whom the Scriptures were given as believe in neither God nor the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His apostle have forbidden, and do not embrace the true Faith, until they pay tribute out of hand and are utterly subdued. (9:29)

Believers, take neither the Jews nor the Christians for your friends. They are friends with one another. Whoever of you seeks their friendship shall become one of their number. God does not guide the wrongdoers. (5:51)

Fight against them until idolatry is no more and God's religion reigns supreme. But if they desist, fight none except the evil-doers. (2: 193)

The hadith, which contains the story of the life and sayings of Muhammad, provides plenty of evidence of violence and intolerance toward non-Muslims. Here are a few quotations taken from the hadith collection of Sahih al Bukhari, the authoritative books on Sunni Islam:

Allah's Apostle said, "Know that paradise is under the shades of swords."

Allah's Apostle said, "I have been ordered to fight with the people till they say, 'None has the right to be worshipped but Allah,' and whoever says, 'None has the right to be worshipped but Allah,' his life and property will be spared by me..."

Whoever changed his Islamic religion, then kill him.

(Quoted in Norman L, Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam; The Crescent in Light of the Cross*, p. 326.)

Let's be honest

These and many other statements in the Koran and the hadith reveal a harsh attitude to those Christians who hold to a view of the Bible rooted in the historic Christian faith and confessions. Nonetheless, the authors of this "Common Word" letter write, I assume with a straight face, the following high-minded admonition to us Christians:

Never before have Muslims delivered this kind of definitive consensus statement on Christianity. Rather than engage in polemic, the signatories have adopted the traditional and mainstream Islamic position of respecting the Christian scripture and calling Christians to be more, not less, faithful to it.

This summary statement sheds a great deal of light on the difficulties facing Christians who want to have an open and honest discussion with Muslim leaders. For

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Reflections

Growing leadership

Eternal Student

Peter Schuurman

I confess that I have often slipped into a thought pattern in which I believe the solution to all our problems lies in the election a strong, heroic leader. I have subconsciously thought this about government, church, and the universities where I have studied and worked. If only we had a great leader, things would be better! Preferably a glossy one, like on Christian magazines cover pages.

I was recently at a Christian Reformed Home Missions conference where church planter Darryl Bierman quoted a denominational document stating that "the number one struggle in the CRC at this time is a leadership struggle." In the past we may have assumed that leaders would find their own way into positions of responsibility, but that world no longer exists. Our memberships and general loyalty are in decline, and our ability to retain our youth is waning: we need to *intentionally* develop a leadership culture. Churches need to spot potential leaders, provide them with opportunities to grow and make mistakes, and nurture them for life-long service in God's kingdom.

In a word, leaders are made, not born; they are grown, not found. We need to unlearn so much.

All this chatter about leadership is not simply a dying church panicking for survival, nor is it a wish to raise up a crop of heroic leaders. It is a call to wake up and steward our theological vision and mission through deliberate discipleship. The *Disciples* from Faith Alive, the denominational booklet *Effective Leadership in the Church* the plans for a Leadership Institute of the Christian Reformed Church are all responses to this growing need.

Misfit leaders

First of all, however, we need to resist the temptation to pursue the relevant, the spectacular, the upwardly-mobile. I was at a campus ministry gathering where one colleague was bemoaning how most of the students that came by her office were more often than not the misfits of the school. "I wish some of the more popular, socially skilled students would join my group. Then things would really take off."

A number of us nodded our heads in sympathetic agreement. But not all of us. "Good thing Jesus didn't think that way," said one in the crowd. "It seems he gravitated toward the misfits."

I instantly felt ashamed. I was bowing down to the idol of excellence again. We need to shift our dreams so that we see great potential in our brothers and sisters rather than keep looking past them to snag some ready-made hero we hope is waiting in the wings. This is mindset fertilized by the notion of the priesthood of all believers.

The reality is this: *no one is fully formed.* In fact, it may be that those who have suffered along life's way may in the long run make better leaders. Dan B. Allender says in his book *Leading with a Limp: Turning Your Struggles into Strengths* (Waterbrook, 2006) that "a leader is often a wounded individual who feels drawn to rectify, to amend the suffering she has endured in the past." Good leaders, he says, are your organization's head sinner, and they doubt themselves and disappoint followers: "[God] calls us to brokenness, not performance; to relationships, not commotion; to grace, not success." The best are always reluctant, moving forward through ambiguity, motivated by a desire to influence others for the good. They have given up the illusory idol of control, recognize the danger of narcissism, and push for God's mission first.

Leader-fools

Pastor Bierman added another point in this regard. Often our model of church government discourages creative leaders. Decisions take months as committees are set up and movement has to wait for the next classis meeting, months away. Elections in church are more political or about popularity than about spiritual maturity. Congregations vote for what they want, not for what they need.

There is a character of person – not a heroic sort, but a creative, original, "out-of-the-box" dreamer – who can be suppressed in the somber, rational deliberations of church meetings. This occurs not only in churches.

The *Harvard Business Review* had an article a few years ago that urged businesses to protect the voices of leadership from below. "Whistle blowers, creative deviants, and other such original voices routinely get smashed and silenced in organizational life. They generate disequilibrium, and the easiest way for an organization to restore equilibrium is to neutralize those voices, sometimes in the name of teamwork and 'alignment.'" Minority voices – diversity of both old and new stripes – comes with a plurality and ambiguity that is hard for deliberative bodies to manage. Perhaps most threatening of all is the voice of young people. Those we need to hear from most can be the ones we disregard first. Like those who barely saw young David standing beside all his brothers, we are looking for the tall man, the "natural" anointed one.

Allender suggests in *Leading with a Limp* God "chooses the foolish and the weak to subvert our natural tendency to pride. A leader's wisdom can't be conventional and still be fully Christian." The future is a wild, chaotic possibility, and the more we try to control it, the more we will miss what the Spirit has to say to the churches. The first thing we need to do is trust and let go; then graciously open up a place for our younger brothers and sisters to grow in the kind of character and competency worthy of leadership.

Peter Schuurman is the Christian Reformed Education Mission Leader and resides in Guelph, Ontario.

Mark Stephenson

With Ash Wednesday just past and Good Friday on the way, we Christians journey through Lent with our eyes both on the cross and on our desperate need for our wounded Savior.

Isaiah prophesied about him, "There were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness." (Isaiah 52:14) This picture of a disfigured messiah contrasts sharply with the requirements for priests and sacrificial animals given in Old Testament law. Animals, and for some ritual actions, the priests themselves were to be "without blemish."

That contrast led one commentator to write, "This vision of the messiah is almost the photo-negative of the image of the priest in the Torah. The messiah is ritually impure (the disease, it is inferred, is leprosy which makes one ritually impure), excluded from society. Though physically blemished and ritually impure, this is the one through whom redemption will come."[1]

Redemption comes to us through a blemished and disfigured Messiah, thank God. He became like us who are blemished and disfigured. "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows." (Isaiah 53:4)

I'm thankful that the Messiah took up my infirmities for several reasons. He "became sin" for me so that I might become "the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21) He is not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with my weaknesses, but has been tempted in every way, just as I am – yet was without sin. (Hebrews 4:15) Furthermore, after his resurrection neither I nor anyone else might have ever known him had he not taken up our infirmities.

Here's what I mean. A couple of days after Jesus was crucified, the disciples were huddled together in their agony and grief. Suddenly a figure appeared among them, terrifying them. Who, or what, was this thing? It was the resurrected Jesus, but they could not recognize him. He revealed himself to them by showing them the marks of his wounds. "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself!" (Luke 24:39)

Amazing! While the gods of this world promise power, wealth, beauty, and self-actualization, our God stoops to us where we are at. We look at him and see ourselves as we are deep down. We recognize him in the marks of the profoundest of human disability which he took upon himself, our sin.

One author writes, "In presenting his impaired body to his startled friends, the resurrected Jesus is revealed as the disabled God. Jesus, the resurrected Savior, calls for his frightened companions to recognize in the marks of impairment their own connection with God, their salvation."[2]

And by his wounds we are healed.

Mark Stephenson is the CRC's Director of Disability Concerns. This meditation first appeared in "FYI, a newsletter for staff of the Christian Reformed Church in North America".

Notes:

[1] Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, "Misconceptions about Disabilities in the Hebrew Bible," – Journal of Religion, Disability & Health –, Vol. 10. No. 3/4, p. 84.

[2] Nancy Eiesland, "Liberation, Inclusion, and Justice: A Faith Response to Persons with Disabilities," – Impact –, Volume 14, No. 3, Winter 2001/02, downloaded January 2, 2008, from http://list.crcna.net/t/573485/52332/1161/0/

Christianity and Islam *cont. from page 5*

every assertion in the preceding paragraph is untrue.

Their letter is not a consensus statement on Christianity, but a falsification of it. It is highly polemic. The "traditional and mainstream Islamic position" is not one of respecting the Christian scripture. Its calling on Christians to be more faithful to the Bible is hypocritical and, to put it mildly, in bad taste.

Rather than contributing to a better understanding between two religious communities, it muddies the waters. Not surprisingly, it is also contributing to the confusion and division within the Christian community itself. (More about that in my next column.)

They write that they are in favour of justice and freedom of religion. But why then do they not in unmistakable language expose and condemn the indiscriminate killing and mutilation of thousands of victims in Iraq and Afghanistan, all done in the name of Islam? And why do they not similarly condemn the persecution of Christians and other non-Muslims in Islam-ruled countries, where conversion from Islam is a capital offence?

If they would back up their fine-sounding words with deeds, they would demonstrate their good faith and thereby truly advance mutual trust and goodwill. Until they do that, Christians should treat this Open Letter for what it is, a piece of blatant propaganda.

To be continued.

Harry Antonides

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Stewardship

Many Americans switch religious denominations, study finds

Jane Lampman

A panoramic snapshot of American religious life in 2008 reveals an extraordinary dynamism that is reshaping the country's major traditions in historic ways. Almost half of Americans have moved to a different religious denomination from that in which they were raised, and 28 percent have switched to a different major tradition or to no religion (i.e., from Roman Catholic to Protestant, Jewish to unaffiliated).

The fluidity is combining with immigration to spur dramatic changes in the religious landscape. Protestantism appears on the verge of losing its majority status. The number of "unaffiliated" Americans has doubled, to 16 percent. One-third of Catholics are now Latino as Catholicism is depending on immigration to maintain its share of the population.

These shifts are captured in a survey released Monday, Feb. 25 by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

"The extent of change in the American religious marketplace is remarkable," says Luis Lugo, the Pew Forum's director. "Everyone is losing, and has difficulty retaining childhood members, but everyone is also gaining."

The report is the first of three that Pew will release this year from a path-breaking survey of the US religious landscape. Based on interviews in English or Spanish with a representative sample of 35,000 adults, it describes America's religious composition and the changes under way. Later this spring, the second report will analyze Americans' beliefs and practices, and the third, their social and political values.

The movement between churches and denominations is not new, but the report documents its remarkable scope. "Religious fluidity is part of a larger picture of fluidity in American life generally," says Wade Clark Roof, author of "Spiritual Marketplace" and professor at University of California at Santa Barbara. "You can read this as 'It's what America is about – we choose.... The downside is enormous instability, lack of grounding, wandering in the wilderness."

Observers point to many reasons for the shifts. People may change churches because they relocate to a part of the country where different denominations predominate, or they may prefer another style of worship. Whatever the reasons, the survey reveals some clear winners and losers.

Protestantism, which has shaped American identity for generations, may soon become a minority faith. In the 1980s, 65 percent of Americans called themselves Protestants; today that number is down to 51 percent. Only 43 percent of those aged 18-29 say they are Protestant.

Much has been written about the declines in mainline churches. But in comparing the current religious affiliation of adults with their childhood affiliations, the survey found a net loss of 3.7 percent for Baptists (Baptists account for one-third of all Protestants and nearly two-thirds of black Protestant churches.)

Perhaps the big surprise, though, relates to Roman Catholicism, which experienced the greatest net loss. While 31.4 percent of adults say they were raised Catholic, today only 23.9 percent identify as Catholic, a net loss of 7.5 percent. "The Catholic numbers are eye-popping," says Dr. Lugo. "One out of every 10 people you meet on the street is a former Catholic."

Fortunately for the Church, however, its share of the religious pie has remained steady in recent decades, due partly to conversions but largely to immigration. Catholics account for 24 percent of the adult population, but immigration could well boost its future share.

"Within our society, Protestants basically outnumber Catholics 2 to 1," Lugo says. "Among immigrants, it's the reverse: Catholics outnumber Protestants by more than 2 to 1."

The big winner on the shifting religious scene is the group of "unaffiliated" Americans. Today 16.1 percent of adults fit that category. Among young people 18 to 29, one-quarter are unaffiliated.

It's common for young adults completing education or starting careers to become detached from their faith connection. Other people may become disillusioned with organized religion.

"Scandals and conflicts lead some to distance themselves even though they still hold Christian beliefs," says Darren Sherkat, a sociologist at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, who has studied the unaffiliated. "A perhaps growing percentage are disaffiliated because they don't hold Christian beliefs."

The survey found that 1.6 percent of adults call themselves atheists and 2.4 percent are agnostics (who consider God to be unknowable). The remaining 12 percent in "unaffiliated" split almost evenly between the secular and the religious, who may practice their faith on their own.

Although this category is growing

See **Pew Forum** *on page 8*

Day 1 – Light

Stewardship is a very broad subject. You may get a sense of that if you regularly read this column. Stewardship is about the use and care of everything that God has entrusted to us, the beings that he created in his own image. God vested us with the authority and responsibility to rule over all that he made. That, in essence, is where our broad stewardship mandate comes from. To help us reflect on that awesome responsibility – our cultural mandate – I thought I would lead you through a series of seven reflections based on the days of creation as described in the book of Genesis. I hope that you will enjoy this series.

"In the beginning…" well, you have got to start somewhere and it's very human to think in terms of beginning and end. God has no such limitations. Neither does he have to start with something for he is able to create something out of nothing. Humanly speaking, though, we are not able to do that. In the beginning the earth was formless and empty and it was depicted as dark and deep, yet God was there! He hovered over this primordial soup and on that first day of creation, God called for light. Light came and overcame the darkness of night. And so the first creation day ended with God pleased!

When we think of light, we think of the sun. Yet on the first act of creation, God had not created the sun, the moon or the stars. God created light which was contrasted sharply with darkness. Was God the light himself? It seems to me to be a foreshadow of what is described for our future in Revelation 22:5 "There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever." In 1 Timothy 6:16b, God is described as living in "…in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen." The Apostle John records Jesus as declaring: "… I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12). The light is associated with God – he created it and he gives it!

As you reflect on the vastness of what it means that God is our primary source of light and how Jesus says he is the light that overcomes eternal darkness – let its meaning sink in. This is the light that overcomes darkness eternally. Its meaning goes beyond just thinking of light simply as radiation that our eyes can detect and use to distinguish forms and images. Sometimes we ought to listen to those who are physically blind to realize the depth of light that scripture is referring to. It is not just about seeing an object but rather goes into the realm of life or death or the light of the resurrection and the darkness of sin.

God hovered over the chaos of an unformed earth and declared light.

How then are we to be stewards of this light? We're not just reflecting on how to be energy efficient or better users of the daytime for work (daylight savings time), rather this is about being stewards of the light that God has given within us. It is very much about our witness, our 'bearing of the light' in our relationships with others. It is about the 'treasure in jars of clay' that Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 4:7-12. This treasure is the very words of life – the light that we bring to a world lost in the darkness of sin. Of this we are stewards because Jesus has entrusted this knowledge, this kingdom ministry to his disciples and therefore also to us his modern day disciples.

Did you know that wherever you go, you bear light? Sometimes we hide it as the Sunday-school song goes: "Hide it under a bushel, No! I'm going to let it shine!" As stewards of the light we need to show the light plainly, practically, wisely, and faithfully! We are conveyers of brightness and can brighten anyone's day. God will certainly hold us accountable for the 'light of life' that he has entrusted to us. We have the full knowledge of salvation. We get to go to the city that is light and doesn't need the sun anymore!

Sometimes we walk as if we are in darkness. We are gloomy and down on ourselves. We may have legitimate reasons to be that way. You need some light – true light, the light of Jesus. Ask for it – Jesus will provide.

Let us be good stewards of light – God's light. God created the light and he recreated life through Jesus death and resurrection. We may live bearing this light and there's no limit on what that light will do!

Stewardly tip: Right exposure. Cameras have sensors that measure the light and are used to set the shutter opening and speed for proper exposure of an image on the film. Similarly, in order for you to bear God's image (and you are an image bearer of God) you need to have regular proper exposure to him. The disciplines of prayer, scripture reading, study and meditation, and worship are ways of opening your lens to God's light. Get the right exposure – regularly.

Readers: Share your 'Stewardly tips' so that we all can make better use of the resources God has entrusted to us. Submit your suggestions (by mail to *Christian Courier* or by email to my address below) and provide your contact information so that we can acknowledge your contribution or ask you for more details.

Next issue: Day 2 – Sky & Sea

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Chinese government carries out mass sentencing of House Church leaders

Michael Ireland

SHANGDONG PROVINCE, CHINA (ANS) – Twenty-one prominent Christian leaders have been sentenced to re-education through labor in what China Aid Association (CAA) describes as the largest mass sentencing of house church leaders in China in 25 years.

CAA says the Linyi City Re-education through Labor Commission in Shandong Province simultaneously sentenced 17 male and 4 female church leaders to re-education through labor for fifteen months to three years.

According to news released by CAA, the 21 believers were detained during a mass arrest of 270 Christian leaders on December 7, 2007 in Hedeng District, Linyi City as they gathered for leadership training. The others detained with them were fined and released in the intervening period. The leaders were accused of holding an "illegal religious gathering" and the 21 labeled as members of an "evil cult," a term which Chinese authorities arbitrarily apply to unregistered religious groups.

The news of the mass sentencing comes just a day after CAA published an open letter to the international community from the President of the Chinese House Church Alliance, Pastor Zhang Mingxuan.

In the letter, Pastor Zhang describes the persecution he has faced as a Christian leader, including being incarcerated on twelve occasions. He also describes how the Public Security Bureau have harassed an orphanage he ran with his two sons and forced it to close.

CAA says Pastor Zhang expresses support for the Beijing Olympics, but hopes that the attention on China around the Games will encourage the Chinese Government to allow real freedom of religion and to release Christians imprisoned as a result of their faith.

The mass sentencing and Pastor Zhang's letter follow a significant increase in persecution against the house churches in China last year and a level of expulsion of foreign Christians not seen since the 1950s, according to CAA's annual report.

A copy of Pastor Zhang's letter can be found on the CAA website at http://chinaaid.org/2008/02/18/we_want_the_olympics_but_we_want_love_and_justice_more/

CAA also reports that four Christians were detained for five days at the end of January for handing out Christian tracts in Zhejiang province. Additionally, two female House Church Alliance leaders were taken into custody on Monday, February 18, on their way to Beijing. Their whereabouts is currently unknown. CAA believes this activity is designed to dismantle the House Church Alliance before the Olympic Games start.

According to an eyewitness 40-50 policemen from 12 different towns were involved in the mass detention in December. The pastors were handcuffed in pairs and taken to the police station for questioning.

In 1983, thousands of house church leaders were sent to labor camps when the Chinese authorities launched the first "strike hard" campaign.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive, Mervyn Thomas, says: "It is shocking that China would commit such a grave and large scale violation of religious freedom as the eyes of the world are focused on the nation. At a time when Beijing is hosting a sporting event, which is based on 'universal fundamental ethical principles,' the crackdown on China's peaceful Christian house churches must not go unnoticed. We join Pastor Zhang in his desire for China to release the many Christians detained as a result of their faith and we urge the international community to respond to the serious breaches of international standards committed against religious believers in China."

CSW is a human rights organization which specializes in religious freedom, works on behalf of those persecuted for their Christian beliefs and promotes religious liberty for all.

Michael Ireland, Chief Correspondent of ANS, is an international British freelance journalist who was formerly a reporter with a London newspaper and has been a frequent contributor to UCB Europe, a British Christian radio station.

African church membership growth swells Lutheran numbers

Geneva (ENI) – Africa's Lutheran churches saw their total membership increase over the past year by nearly two million, boosting the total number of members of the Lutheran World Federation worldwide to more than 68.3 million.

The Geneva-based federation says that Lutheran churches in Asia also registered an increase overall in the period, while slight decreases were again recorded in other world regions.

With an increase of 368,861 members, or 8.2 percent, to 4.87 million, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, the largest LWF member church in Africa, now becomes the second largest worldwide.

The largest LWF church is the Church of Sweden, which remained nearly unchanged over the course of 2007, with a slight drop of 0.03 percent to reach 6,893,901 members, the LFW said. Still, Germany remains the country with largest overall Lutheran count at 12.63 million, but they belong to different churches, some of which are organized on a regional basis.

According to LWF statistics announced on February 15, membership in 140 in the organization's 140 churches and other congregations in 78 countries worldwide rose by a total of 1.64 million reaching 68,322,299, an increase of 2.5 percent over the previous year. In 2006, LWF member churches had some 66.7 million members worldwide, up from 66.2 million in 2005.

Over the past year, the total membership of all Lutheran churches (including those that do not belong to the LWF) worldwide rose by 1.62 million to 71,823,423. This represents an increase of 2.3 percent. In 2006, all Lutheran churches worldwide counted some 70.2 million members, up from 69.8 million in 2005.

Over the past year, LWF church membership in Africa rose by 1.93 million or 12.7 percent to reach a total of 17 129 230. The membership of non-LWF Lutheran churches in Africa remained unchanged at 56,069 Lutherans.

Among African churches, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, the continent's second-largest Lutheran church, recorded the highest membership increase of 32.4 percent with an additional 1,132,480 new members to reach a total of 4,632,480, making it the fourth largest Lutheran church in the world.

The church in Tanzania attributes its growth to "effective evangelism in [its] dioceses over the past two years. And a realistic authentication of statistics."

The total number of Lutherans in Asia rose 101,439 in 2007, an increase of 1.22 percent. Of the 8,415,776 Lutherans in Asia, 8.27 million belonged to LWF member churches.

Membership in Asia's largest Lutheran church, the Protestant Christian Batak Church (Indonesia) remained steady at 3.75 million, while in terms of absolute figures, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea registered the highest growth in the region with 85,000 new members or 10.4 percent increase, to count 900,000 members.

In Europe, however, the total membership of Lutheran churches fell again, this time by 292,117, or 0.78 percent, to reach 37,177,468. But the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia recorded a 25 percent membership increase or 3,000 new members to reach 15,000. The Lutheran Church in Great Britain grew by 18.6 percent (440 members) to 2,810.

The total membership in Lutheran churches in Latin America and the Caribbean fell last year by 14,053, or 1.26 percent, to reach 1.1million. A drop of 2.34 percent among LWF member churches in the region put the total at 822,074. Non-LWF churches registered 5,633 new members, a 2 percent increase, to reach 282,120. The region's largest Lutheran church, the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil, registered a 2.3 percent decrease (16,756) members to reach 703,000.

Total LWF membership in North American Lutheran churches fell by 98,652, or 1.23 percent, in 2007. Of a total 7.9 million Lutherans, 4,958,203 belonged to LWF member churches. The region's LWF member churches registered a decrease of 75,248 members, or 1.49 percent.

US Presbyterian body rules out ordination of non-celibate gays

Chris Herlinger

New York (ENI) – The highest court of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has issued a ruling that bars the ordination of non-celibate homosexual clergy in the US denomination.

Opponents of the decision pledged to take the issue to the denomination's 2008 general assembly, scheduled for June 21-28 in San Jose, California, after the court stated that ordination rules can only be changed by alterations to the church's constitution.

"It is time for Presbyterians to end the discrimination against their [gay and lesbian] sisters and brothers and to honour their calls to ordained office," New Light Presbyterians, a Presbyterian gay rights advocacy group, said in an February 18 statement. The group noted that nine US local presbyteries (church districts) have already stated their public opposition to the ban on ordaining gay and lesbian clergy.

But Presbyterians for Renewal, praised the court's decision upholding sexual behaviour standards, saying the decision promoted church "peace," "unity" and "purity." It said, "This standard reflects both the clear teaching of Scripture and the mind of the church."

The decision by the 16-member General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission upholds long-standing rules that candidates for ordination in the 3-million member denomination who are not married adhere to a commitment to "fidelity and chastity".

A decision by the denomination's 2006 general assembly permitted a local presbytery some leeway on the question of ordination by allowing homosexual ministerial candidates to publicly declare an objection, or in the Presbyterian tradition, a "scruple," to the celibacy rules.

However, the court ended such leeway. It said that while "scruples" are still permitted, they do not permit departure from the requirement for "fidelity and chastity". The celibacy rules can only be altered by changes to the denomination's constitution, something that would require a general assembly decision, it stated.

"Until that occurs," the ruling stated, "individual candidates, officers, examining and governing bodies must adhere to [the standards]."

Pew Forum ... *continued from page 7*

the fastest, the survey shows that about half of the unaffiliated end up returning to a faith connection. Other research, however, indicates that many young people today are disaffected from Christianity, and religious leaders worry that they won't follow the usual return pattern.

Currently Christianity retains the allegiance of 78 percent of Americans. Nondenominational churches are growing and attracting about 5 percent of adults.

Other world faiths also now account for 5 percent of the population. Their net losses or gains in affiliation were relatively small: Jews dropped by 0.2 percent, Muslims gained by 0.1 percent, Buddhists gained by 0.3 percent, and Hindus showed no change.

The survey, which provides information on more than a dozen traditions and on religious groups as small as 3/10 of one percent of the adult population, is available at www.pewforum.org

Jane Lampman is a staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Is the gospel of the resurrection a false witness?

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised.

I Corinthians 15:15

A. A. van Ruler

Here Paul comes to a far-reaching conclusion. It cuts deep. If there is no resurrection from the dead, he says, then Christ has not been raised. Then, moreover, all the Christian preaching loses its central core and is thus without real content. And then the Christian faith has lost its object and ground.

For the resurrection of Christ is the axis or hinge around which the whole gospel turns. But Paul goes even further and deeper in this passage. If we deny the resurrection, we are unmasked as false witnesses over toward God – and with "we" he is also speaking of the apostles.

This is a terribly disturbing conclusion. For the whole business of the living God and his role in the world depends on the apostolic witness in the New Testament, just as in the Old Testament it depended on Moses and the prophets. This is how the living God works. He uses people. He chooses them freely, and he places them in this world as his representatives, that is, to witness about him. They are to witness about him in the courtroom of the hearts and consciences, the reason and understanding of all humanity. This is because the living God acts historically. He performs his deeds in history and on this earth.

He chooses some to be eye-witnesses to those deeds. Then they must witness concerning what they have seen and experienced. And God's business on earth depends wholly on this witness. His church and his kingdom stand or fall depending on whether this witness is true or false.

Everything depends on this silken thread that runs through history....

This is why Paul is so disturbed by the conclusion he is forced to draw from the assertion that there is no resurrection of the dead. If this were true, then the apostles would be false witnesses regarding God. They have claimed that God raised Christ from the dead. This is the hallmark of an apostle. An apostle is an eye-witness to Christ's resurrection.

Paul is shown confounding two Jewish elders, in this 12th-century painting in the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, Italy. The Roman soldier in the background is allowing the discussion to take place.

All God's acts in history are concentrated in the resurrection. It is God's act par excellence. It happened once, but it has decisive meaning for time and eternity. The whole of salvation depends on it, and thus also the redemption of all created reality and the meaning of all being.

This act also concentrates the entire divinity of God: in it he is supremely God in that he is able to overcome even death.

When he performed this central deed in history, the Lord God appointed twelve men and as well as several others to be eye-witnesses to it so that later they might testify to the whole world.

And is everything they say suddenly false? This is the disturbing, deep-cutting conclusion that Paul draws. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. However, then the apostles have been saying something about God that is not true. Then they have testified against God. Then they are false witnesses toward God.

And then the entire apostolate crumbles. It is unmasked as deception on the highest levels of world history. The entire church of God and the kingdom of God as it has been called into existence in the world would then rest on a horrible falsification.

What is perhaps even worse, the meaning and the redemption of all being which we thought to have found in the church and kingdom would then turn out to be nothing but soap bubbles. We had thought that being had been saved from the abyss of corruption and had found its meaning in God's eternal glory. For this is the meaning of the apostolic proclamation regarding the resurrection and new life.

But if all this is nothing but illusion, if the apostles are false witnesses, then the world is meaningless, or at least it doesn't have the meaning we thought it had on the basis of their witness.

Even worse, not only would the apostolate be unmasked as false, the church and the kingdom as a mistake, and the meaning of the world as an illusion, but God himself would also be very different from how he was portrayed by the apostles. They would be false witnesses regarding God, says Paul, shuddering at the thought. In fact, they would be testifying against God. God would not have done what they said he did. So God would not be the God they have been describing.

Then they would have spoken error regarding God, and we would still be wholly in the dark or in a fog about the ground and origin of all being. We would have to conceive of a God who is very different from the one we have come to know on the basis of the apostolic gospel.

Becoming accustomed to the apostolic way of picturing God has been an arduous journey. To get there we had to be converted from our pagan religion, break with our natural darkness of heart and be raised to joy. For God, as proclaimed by the apostles and evangelists, was a God who saved and redeemed us, a God of joy and trust, a God of light and the goodness of all things. We had to be transported from the darkness into the kingdom of light.

But what if none of this were true! Then God would not be the Savior who has overcome the great problem of guilt and death. Then the work of his hands would not be a good and beautiful accomplishment. We would have to be converted all over again because it was a mistake and rested on deception. God would be much different than the gospel tells us.

This is the most far-reaching consequence and cuts the deepest. Here we stand before the ultimate decision. But Paul doesn't leave it to us to decide. He lays it out only to demonstrate the impossibility and madness of this viewpoint.

Two verses later he pulls us out of this whirlpool and abyss of thought and being. He says, But Christ has been raided from the dead. This is a fact. There is little for us to decide here, for God has already made a decision in our history. The apostolic preaching of the gospel lays this on our hearts. By the gentle power of the Spirit we eventually succumb to this gracious and joyful decision of god. Faith and trust are once again conceived in our hearts.

Challenges

A man of diminishing abilities

Flowers & Thistles
Curt Gesch

So there I was: I was on the 11:00 p.m. "red-eye" flight from Vancouver. We were arriving late after delayed departure and landing in Toronto at about the time that I should have been boarding my flight to Milwaukee. I had only carry-on baggage, but I had to get from one gate, through U.S. Customs and Immigration, through security, and still make my flight.

Carrying my briefcase, dragging a small suitcase, and a cane held horizontal because I had no way to use it properly didn't sound like a party to me, so I asked for a "cart" – the little golf-mobile – to transport me. This had worked before when I had a long distance to travel and little time.

The agent at the departure ramp told me, "Oh, I didn't know you needed a cart; please stand over there [she pointed] and I'll call one." So there I stood with people streaming around me, with an "assistance needed" sign behind me. I felt as if I had a different sign – "Here he is, a 59-year-old cripple who doesn't look like he REALLY needs a ride " – behind me.

The cart arrived, and drove past me. The agent chased it. The cart returned. Unfortunately, the agent spoke little Mandarin and the driver little English, but sign language helped get the message across: "Take him to the escalator."

The agent then said, "You can go up the escalator, can't you?" That imaginary sign flashed on again. "Ah, sure, but I need to get through customs and my flight is supposed to be boarding."

"Oh, dear. OK, I'll meet you at the escalator." She ran like Elijah before Ahab's chariot and beat the cart to the escalator. "I'll take you to customs," she said, moving a wheelchair into position.

"Doesn't the cart have a special elevator, like in Vancouver? I really don't need a wheelchair." (There was that imaginary sign again.)

"Just get in. Here we go."

In a few moments, I was whizzed to the express lane for the Customs people, handed a form, filled it out, handed it back, and told, "OK." And was told to wait right there, again in a central location with people trotting, walking, running, grumbling all around me. The condensed version of the imaginary sign – "How does HE need a wheelchair?" – hovered above my head and slightly behind me.

After a few minutes a lady came up to me and said, "And where am I taking you?" In the background I heard someone paging me. And an employee whispering to my helper, "Fastfastfast." She very deliberately patted me on the shoulder and said in a voice that was – I thought – ¼ pity; ¼ flirtation; ½ concern, "Now don't you worry, sir, we'll get you there." And off to the races we went.

When we arrived at the security check, the pilots' line was backed up so we went through the shortest of the regular lines. "Sir, do you think you can walk through the arch without your cane? Someone will meet you on the other side to take you to your gate." Oh, good, I thought, tag-team wheelchair races. So off came the shoes and then another request, "Please remove your suspenders." I did. . . with no dire consequences. Dress again and sit myself in the wheelchair.

This time my attendant was the Donovan Bailey of wheelchair-pushers. We zoomed down the long concourse, often on the British side of the path, while "Ed" (I forget his real name) told the people at the gate in no uncertain terms that we would be there in a second. When he received no reply on his walkie-talkie, he muttered, "OK, then, don't talk to me; and I won't talk to you." He turned the machine off and told me, "There are two people behind you, so don't worry."

This chap appealed to my curmudgeonly nature so I initiated a conversation. I asked him if he got lots of exercise with that job. "Ed" said he had been working fifty days straight, and computed that on a busy day he walked more than ten miles. "You won't see many men in their late 50's weighing the same as when they graduated from high school." I agreed but didn't volunteer my weight.

When we got to the gate, "Ed" took my boarding pass, walked up to the attendant who was on the telephone, gently moved her aside, ran my pass through the machine and wheeled me to the ramp. "Can you walk the rest of the way?" Ed asked. After my cart-chair-chair-chair adventure, I practically skipped onto the jet. . . which had waited for me and "the other two" whom functioned as an angst-suppressor. I suspect they didn't exist.

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As a regional advocate for the Christian Reformed Church Disabilities Concerns Committee, I naturally deprogrammed myself: "What could I learn from this experience?" Here are the lessons in no particular order.

1. I learned what it is like to feel "on view" as a person needing extra help because of a disability. (Remember those signs, visible and imaginary.)
2. I learned that – contrary to popular buzz – airport personnel can be very helpful.
3. I learned from "Ed" that a certain transparency could help him serve me. While with him my imaginary sign faded right away.
4. I learned that my best response to being in a little bit of a state of helplessness was gratitude. Perhaps, as the Heidelberg Catechism says, "prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us." I wonder if, humanly speaking, "thankfulness might be the most important part of communication to one another."
5. I learned, as a man over fifty – a "man of diminishing abilities" – that the Rev. Mark Stephenson will soon temporarily joining the 50's club, just as I am graduating to a more exalted status.
6. As I get less physically able, my soul seems to be getting more able to achieve two goals: contentment and patience.

Curt Gesch has been awaiting (the Canadian health care system) a free (also the Canadian health care system) hip joint resurfacing operation. He spends a lot of his time making canes and walking sticks and pretending that he doesn't need them.

Winter woes

Berta Hosmar

The weatherman has not been the most popular T.V. personality during the month of February, 2008. I like to think that he almost looked a little guilty at times when he predicted yet another snowstorm. Words like *freezing rain, ice pellets, extreme cold-weather alert* became all too familiar. If you are a senior who doesn't spend all winter in warmer climates, this severe winter weather that seems to drag on and on can get you down if you let it.

During the most recent blizzard my husband and I noticed that our conversation became rather uninteresting. At first we remarked how cozy it was to be safely inside in this brutal weather, while a younger generation had to brave the elements to get to work. We had our computer, our telephone, the T.V., our books, heat and hydro, food in the house, what more could we want? We did not even have to shovel our driveway for we have a contract with a neighbor. He promptly gets to work as soon as it stops snowing.

After several hours though, we occasionally caught ourselves peering through the living room window to see if any snow plows were out on the road. After a full 24 hours of complete isolation from the outside world, and after the snowdrifts in front of our garage grew taller by the hour, our conversation deteriorated to uttering profound statements like: "I wonder if that snow will ever stop falling?" Or: "Did you hear that? That's the sound of a snowplow." Or: "Look, the neighbor across the road just got his snow blower started."

I've often wondered how the early pioneers with only wood stoves to keep them from freezing survived the winter. How did young mothers with small children keep their brood happy, cooped up as they were during dark winter days or blizzards with only an oil lamp or candles to light their homes or cabins, while dad was off somewhere setting traps or chopping wood or melting ice to keep the water supply flowing, or by shooting some wildlife to keep his family fed when the food supply dwindled.

But then, let's face it, my generation also experienced hardships if they were born or grew up during the second world war and happened to live in Holland. I vividly remember the winter of 1944-45, or, as it later became known, the hunger winter.

Our family was blessed for we did not starve, like people in the cities of Western Holland. We lived on a farm and still had potatoes and root vegetables and apples, and even some milk, although every farmer had to deliver his quota of milk to the German occupiers. We also had enough wood for the stove to keep the roomy farm kitchen warm during bitterly cold weather, although the rest of the house was freezing. We wore layers of clothing and often stomped around on wooden shoes filled with straw to keep our feet from frostbite. At night we often wore socks in bed, or, oh bliss – warmed our feet on a hot-water bottle.

Every morning we reluctantly crawled from underneath layers of blankets and made a mad dash downstairs to the kitchen. We were allowed to wash and dress near the stove, and dad always brought a few pails of water from a frigid room after breaking the ice first. Our mother would heat some water on the stove to take the chill off. Often we dressed underneath laundry that hung to dry from strings attached to the ceiling. If the weather did not look too bad it would first be hung outside for a few hours, and then sheets and underwear frozen stiff as boards, the laundry would be transferred back to the house to get the drying job finished.

How did people manage during that winter, when we often did not have hydro for more than an hour a day and it would be dark at five o'clock. We had hardly any

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Seasons

Country Living
M. van der Galien

Winter happiness

People living in chilly climates are more content than those living in warm climates.

It's always interesting watching the news when there's a big snowfall in Ottawa. Some travelers at the Ottawa airport were interviewed and were asked how they felt about their cancelled flights. One big guy with a shaved head said he was going to the sunny south and he couldn't wait to get away from all this cold and snow. But he was marooned in the airport and he wasn't happy.

Other travelers expressed similar feelings. Snow, cold, winter blahs – we're off to Florida. That's how many people feel about winter.

This is Canada. We've been spoilt these last 10 years in eastern Ontario when we had very little snow to get us upset. Good old-fashioned snowfall is good for us. Snow, cold, northerly winds, ice pellets – it makes us hardy folks. Toughens us up. That's why winter sports like hockey, skiing, snowboarding and snowmobiling are so important to Canadians. Winter makes us appreciate our warm homes. It should also make us appreciate our different seasons. Would we want summer 12 months of the year? Not me. Winter and cold weather gives me a chance to catch up on things I don't have time to do in the summer. I'm content to take winter life at a much easier pace. And when snow falls I can have a heck of a lot of snow to move. Snow has to be moved in order to get to the barns to feed cattle. Access has to be made to cattle wintering outside.

We're building a house (to retire to) at a nearby lake and I've got more than a kilometer of private winding road to keep open for the carpenters. I'm not complaining. The house (beside the lake) is 90 per cent finished.

Television reporters always seem to interview city folks shoveling out their short little driveway. Why don't they interview a rural family who has half a kilometer of laneway to keep open in blowing winds? They could check out a cattle farmer with a kilometer-long laneway.

And I'm betting the farmer would take the stormy weather all in stride. He'd probably say something like, "We'll get it all cleaned up today. No big deal!"

The city guy with the little laneway would be bitching about the snow and wishing he was in Florida.

Did you know that people who live in chilly climates are much more content than those who live in sunny and warm climates?

According to an article in *The Times*, London, Denmark may be chilly, but it is the most contented place in Europe, while Mediterranean countries are the most miserable. So says a study that concluded that sunshine does not make you happy. (60 Minutes had a segment on the happy Danes on February 17.)

Asked to rate their mood on a scale of one to 10, Scandinavians dominate the happiness league, with Danes averaging 8.3 and Finns 8.1.

Italians, Portuguese and Greeks were on the bottom of the list.

In the EU-funded survey, about 20,000 people are asked every two years to rate their overall happiness and longer-term sense of fulfillment.

The idea that people are happiest along sunny banks of the Mediterranean does not appear to be true, said Luisa Corrado, who led the research. "Italy, Portugal and Greece are consistently among the lowest-scoring countries in the survey, while the highest scores were registered in chillier surrounds of Denmark, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands.

The secret of the region's happiness lay in its balance between work and family life, and city and countryside.

Another survey listed the most expensive cities in the world. Oslo, Norway is the most expensive city followed by London and Copenhagen. The last time the survey was completed in 2003, Oslo was also the most expensive city, followed by Hong Kong and Tokyo.

The study excluded rent. Including rent in the rankings, London and New York are the most expensive places to live by a wide margin.

Workers in Copenhagen (Denmark) earned the highest wages, followed by those in Oslo, Zurich, Geneva, New York and London.

Zurich and Geneva ranked first in purchasing power, according to the study, based on net hourly pay divided by the cost of 122 goods and services, but excluding rent.

I've been to many European cities, including Oslo and Copenhagen. They are wonderful cities. Food we had there was very good and not overly expensive. That's not the case in Switzerland were I found food to be very costly.

Maynard van der Galien farms in the Ottawa Valley at Renfrew. This has been the snowiest winter in 15 years.

How can we best deal with our loneliness?

Getting Unstuck Arlene Van Hove

Jean Vanier, author of "Becoming Human" and founder of L'Arche, a community for people with intellectual disabilities, confesses he discovered his own loneliness in this community. He admits there were probably many times before when he felt lonely, but he had not seen loneliness as a painful human reality. He was good at keeping himself busy. Over time, however, he discovered that feelings of loneliness, however painful, is part of being human. In fact, he believes it to be essential to our humanity.

An acquaintance of mine would agree. He recently shared how everything he knows about interpersonal relationships he learned in order to stave off feelings of loneliness. In other words, he was not readily inclined to interact with others but forced himself to seek relationships that would bring him out of his shell. In return, he believes he has a much richer life. Loneliness, then, can be a good life force in terms of challenging ourselves to become all we are able to be.

More often, however, loneliness is a searing pain caused by life's losses that can become a source of apathy and depression leading to a loss of meaning. Upon this pile of feelings Christians sometimes dump an unrelenting dose of guilt because we tell ourselves we should not feel this way. After all, if the Lord is my shepherd, don't we have everything we need? In response to this question I remind people of Adam's feelings of loneliness (even though God was with him) in the Garden of Eden. And yes, God did create a helper for him, but many of us do not have a life partner.

Loneliness in real life is not a respecter of persons and it can strike anyone, anytime, anywhere. An accurate definition of loneliness is hard to come by because there is no universal manifestation of this malady. For one person it may be short-lived. For another it may seem to last a lifetime.

At the same time, a person's loneliness can only be understood by the one going through it. And since we cannot crawl into another person's skin we cannot feel the depth of their pain. The way we respond to our loneliness can heighten or lessen our pain and emotional distress. So, we may want to ask, how can we best deal with our loneliness?

Loneliness is a universal experience because we are created for connection. At the same time, if we feel lonely because of losses in our lives, we need to give ourselves time to mourn. Through our mourning we will begin to inch forward in what may become a new way of being. Much of how we respond to this new situation will be through trial and error.

I believe quick fixes such as going to the mall for coffee or window shopping, connecting with others on internet or temporarily throwing ourselves into a job that needs to be done are a helpful way to get over the hump for a period of time when family or friends are not available.

At the same time, *realizing* we are lonely is the first step towards healing. By accepting this feeling we recognize our need for relationships. The second step is to *value* our need for relationships. This does not mean we must connect with a lot of people. But a few meaningful face-to-face relationships are as important for our emotional well-being as food is for our physical well-being. The third step is to be *available* to allow relationships to develop in a meaningful way. This will take time and effort. There is truth in the proverb 'to *have* a friend is to *be* a friend.

This brings us to an often unspoken irony – even in the best of relationships, we can feel lonely because our sense of our *separateness* is inescapable. Accepting our separateness can be a fourth step towards healing and a place where our strengths begin. We may want to rethink our approach to what makes us content or at peace with ourselves. As a result, we may want to challenge ourselves to develop new talents or interests so we can appreciate our uniqueness. Having a strong sense of who we are becoming…will help us manage our existential loneliness.

It is also in this place of separateness that we are often nudged in our spiritual life to trust God to meet us at our place of need. I believe it was Henry Nouwen who once said "to live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude." This is not easy. But with effort, our loneliness can help us develop a deeper connection with ourselves, our family and friends and our God. Even then, we may at times continue to feel bouts of loneliness as Jean Vanier has discovered. But accepting this shared aspect of being human with others can be comforting in itself.

Arlene Van Hove is a therapist and a member of the Fleetwood CRC. She can be reached at avanhove@shaw.ca

Travels

Far from home

Intangible Things

Heidi VanderSlikke

The Florida moon was a silver disk set into the black velvet sky early on a February morning. With one last look at our rented villa, Jack gave me a sympathetic smile and put the truck into gear. Two weeks earlier the whole area had seemed overwhelmingly foreign. Now it felt more like we were leaving home than heading for it.

We had signed up for the rental on the internet. Knowing that photos can make anyplace look impressive, I would have been skeptical except that a friend of mine knew the neighbourhood. Upon arrival we gladly discovered that the house lived up to its website image.

However, the street was too narrow to park our trailer and the driveway inclined steeply. We thought we could put the motorbikes in the garage, only to learn that it was actually a "games room." The landlord probably wouldn't take kindly to a pair of Suzukis parked on the carpet. Jack pulled them out of the trailer and set them up as best he could on the precarious slope of the driveway while I carried our luggage into the house.

So the first order of business, late on a Saturday afternoon, was to find a suitable place to store the trailer. I quickly scanned the Yellow Pages, looking for the number of an RV yard I spotted a few miles back on US-27. We had left Ontario a couple of days prior. The road trip went remarkably well, but I wasn't expecting this kind of problem to greet us in Orlando. After a few frantic phone calls, a couple of wrong turns and one final plea with an absentee manager, we abandoned the trailer on the unsecured area of his yard for the weekend. I felt like a contestant on *The Amazing Race*.

We unhooked the trailer and I prayed silently that it would still be there when we returned to meet the manager on Monday morning. Jack sensed my anxiety and tried to cheer me up. "Don't worry," he said. "It's insured."

Meanwhile the wind picked up and big black clouds rolled in. We stopped for some groceries. As we came out of the store, sheets of rain streaked across the parking lot. Back at the villa we scurried inside. I noticed how the gusts of wind rocked the motorbikes in the driveway. "Are we having fun yet?" I asked.

"Sure we are," said Jack as he turned on the patio lights. "Look at this place." He was right. We had our own pool and outdoor hot tub, widescreen TV, dishwasher, high speed internet, beautifully furnished living room, four bedrooms, three baths. The ensuite alone was bigger than our entire bedroom back home. I could get used to this. But I reminded myself not to get too attached. It was only temporary. Even so, we had safely escaped the winter for two whole weeks and I couldn't help but be excited.

Sunday morning dawned bright and sunny. In the afternoon we explored the neighbourhood on the motorbikes. James and Willene arrived that evening and despite the cool temperatures, promptly put the hot tub to good use. They would stay with us for a week. Then Stephanie and her friend, Julie would arrive for the second week. Only our youngest, Jessica, was unable to join us. She needed her remaining vacation time for a field placement.

Early Monday we returned to the storage facility, relieved to see that no one had driven off with our trailer. Walking into the office I almost laughed out loud when I noticed the security camera trained directly on our trailer. Oh me of little faith.

Ocala National Forest

For the next couple of weeks we enjoyed the warm temperatures, sunshine and the smell of orange groves. We visited Jack's cousin and his wife a couple of hours south, toured the everglades, rode to the keys and back up through the Okeechobee area. We loafed by the pool or in the hot tub, spent a Sunday morning in R. C. Sproul's church and explored the Ocala National Forest. We covered nearly as many kilometres on our bikes as we had on the trip down. Time passed much too quickly.

The problem with a good vacation is that you don't want it to end. But it seemed ungrateful to feel sad about going home rather than thankful for a nice holiday. It wasn't realistic, either. As much fun as we had, I couldn't see us spending the rest of our days with nothing better to do than ride motorbikes and play in the pool. Ontario is home – the place where we live and work and are surrounded by all the important people in our lives.

And honestly, in terms of raw beauty, it's hard to beat the panorama of seasons in our province.

That being said, there have been about a half dozen storms in the two weeks since we've come home. I've returned to my regularly scheduled life: shivering in minus 15C temperatures while feeding straw bales into the chopper; sweating in the heat of the barns while placing brand new chicks; wading through the unpaid bills and washing the dishes by hand. If that's not hardship enough, it's back to dial-up internet.

It's not all work and it's not all bad, of course. The other night I paused to admire the sunset. A dazzling palette of colours oozed across the horizon and spilled onto the snowy hillsides (much more spectacular than your average Florida sunset, I might add). *This is my Father's world,* I thought, then realized I had best not get too attached. As God's child I need to remember that I'm still far from "home."

One of these days I'll leave all of this behind for a place much lovelier than anything I could imagine. The sun won't set there, but colours we've never seen will gloriously reflect their Creator's genius. Our days will be filled with purpose and passion and endless joy, and we'll never have to leave. Until then, I truly appreciate this temporary dwelling. But I doubt I'll have a problem with getting too attached to the Ontario winter.

Heidi VanderSlikke lives in Harriston, Ont. Her email: hmvanderslikke@ hotmail.com

Winter...*continued from p. 11*

candles left, let alone oil for lamps, and the stores were empty. Neighbors and friends learned from each other. If you turned a bike with a lantern upside down and assigned a child to turn the pedals by hand, you had enough light to vaguely see what you had on your plate during dinner. The menu seldom varied anyway: greenish, foul-smelling bread with a sweet spread made from boiled sugar beets, or potatoes and vegetables with maybe twice a week a small piece of pork or sausage. The pig that had provided us with these delicacies had been secretly butchered by a neighbor against all regulations of our German occupiers and had made several families happy.

Other times we might be served oatmeal porridge, but we knew how blessed we were. Many were the times when hungry people from the cities knocked on our door and they were never sent away empty-handed.

We also learned to get some light by making"floaters". You filled a cup of glass with water, poured a small amount of oil on top if you were lucky enough to have some left, added a piece of yarn to make a wick, and presto: after striking a match you had a flickering light. It was useful when we went upstairs to our bedrooms. Our oldest sister would lead the parade and we followed close behind so we could see the stairs.

Usually we went to bed at eight, for you could not read in our dark kitchen and if you played board games you had to huddle close together to see what you were doing. We invented games you could play as a family. One game was to have a person in mind who was known by everybody. It was up to the others to guess who that person was. The one who was IT was only allowed to answer with a YES or a NO. Often a teacher or the minister or a relative was picked, for if not everybody was familiar with the person the game could deteriorate and turn into an argument. Other times we picked people from the Bible.

Once, when we were safely tucked into bed the entertainment changed. It was story-telling time. The bedroom doors that separated the boys from the girls were thrown wide open so we could communicate. The windows had been boarded up and the curtains drawn, so no light, be it ever so dim, could be seen through the cracks. This was another regulation to prevent the English Spitfires, loaded with bombs and on their way to Germany, from knowing whether they were close to a city or town. We were allowed to have our small floater burn for half an hour.

Our oldest brother told the most gruesome stories and he always won first prize, although he had me shivering with fear. He would begin with the dramatic sentence: "It was a pitch dark night. Everybody was sleeping.... Suddenly a scream was heard! Robbers were in the house. Somebody had been murdered! We went to explore.... They had killed a chicken! The robbers were sitting around the stove, plucking feathers." Etc.etc.

Often though, after having fallen asleep, we were awakened by the steady drone of Spitfires and the rat-tat-tat of artillery fire, used by the enemy trying, and often succeeding, to shoot down Allied planes. We would run downstairs and huddle around the stove, wrapped in blankets, praying for safety. We had often seen the devastating effects of exploding bombs and burning houses, and we would not go back to bed until it became calm again outside.

Were we bored during that winter without computer games or television or movies, and who knows what else our grandchildren amuse themselves with today?

I don't think so. Scared? Yes, very often. But remembering those days of long ago we can only be thankful that we have lacked nothing during this harsh winter.

Service

Canadian pastors impacted by brokenness and beauty in Nicaragua

The Nicaragua team

Nathan Boersema, (WWCS Mission Coordinator at the Nehemiah Centre, Managua, Nicaragua) Martin Dam (Pastor of Maranatha CRC, York, ON) George Rowaan (Pastor of Tilsonburg CRC, Tilsonburg, ON) John Postuma (Director of Ministry Development for WWCS) Rich deLange (Pastor of Aylmer CRC, Aylmer, ON) Jack Boer (Pastor of First CRC, Montreal, PQ) Kevin teBrake (Pastor of First CRC, Kingston, ON) John Luth (Pastor of St. Albert CRC, St. Albert, AB) Dale Melenberg (Pastor of Maranatha CRC, Calgary, AB)

John Postuma

This past October, eight pastors from across Canada had the unique experience of visiting Nicaragua for a week as part of a HANDS Team with Worldwide Christian Schools. HANDS is an acronym for "Help Another Nation Develop Schools."

The objective of the experience was both "learning and serving." The pastors enjoyed a first-hand opportunity to learn about the land, its history, culture, and people. They also experienced the incredible mission impact of the Nehemiah Center in Managua.

Speakers from various missions met with the pastors to tell the story of how the Lord is bringing transformation to this nation through the power of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The pastors visited various Christian schools and churches in Nicaragua, and met numerous pastors, principals, teachers and students.

Knowing that they would also serve, the pastors brought along their working clothes, gloves and shoes. They literally got hands-on experience – working hard with local construction workers as they laboured on building projects at various school sites.

It was explained to the pastors that they came to help but not to finish the job. The local people are given the satisfaction of completing the project. Yet these pastors found it very rewarding to build friendships with people, to work and worship with fellow Christians in Nicaragua, and to even take time to play sports with children at the Christian schools.

Generous donations

The first Pastors' HANDS Team opportunity was made possible through a donor's generous gift which covered about half the costs of this new initiative. The trip was planned for October, known in many churches as "Pastor's Appreciation Month." The team members' churches were asked to show their appreciation of their pastor by encouraging his participation and providing a matching gift of support.

Why ask pastors to go on a mission trip? These experiences, short as they may be, are life-changing. They enrich pastors with fresh experiences and revitalize them for ministry. They provide a change of scenery as well as fellowship with colleagues in ministry. They are designed to recharge the spiritual batteries of God's servants!

Worldwide Christian Schools would like to thank the pastors who participated on this inaugural mission team, the pastors' families for their support, the churches for their encouragement, the donor for his generosity, and everyone who upheld this Pastors' HANDS Team in prayer. To God be the glory for the success of this exciting new project!

How did the pastors respond? Here are some quotes from the summaries of their experience:

George Rowaan, pastor of Tillsonburg CRC, Ontario, wrote:

"How do you pack a week's worth of memories, experiences and impressions into your mind and heart and then unpack them in one brief paragraph? Although 14 days have elapsed since returning from this trip, the process of unpacking is not yet complete and won't be for some time. It seems every conversation, every sermon, every children's message evokes another story from Nicaragua. Perhaps that is the best way to draw on this amazing adventure – to simply let what has been packed inside flow out slowly and naturally, like a spring of water refreshing the soul."

John Luth, pastor of St. Albert CRC in Alberta wrote:

"Being at the Nehemiah Center helped me to start dreaming about a church that would see itself as a ministry centre for the transformation of the community that Jesus has called it to live and serve in…. I was so pumped on the trip home that I was talking to anyone about the experience. A flight attendant came down the aisle to talk to me about Nicaragua. I told the customs agent in Calgary that she should visit Nicaragua someday. She looked a bit surprised! It was exhilarating because in one short week, any gift I have been given, any suffering I have experienced was used in Jesus' service there. Despite that 'rush', the very next morning after returning home, I was flooded with signs that the Lord is calling me to give myself in his service here."

Jacob Boer, pastor of First CRC in Montreal, Quebec, wrote:

"As a pastor in Quebec, seeing what is happening in Nicaragua gives me hope for the future of my province. Reflecting on the principles the Nehemiah Center and Worldwide Christian Schools hold, and then seeing how they can be adapted and applied here in Quebec, is what I've come away with from the trip. Being reminded of what God can do, and of the beauty and strength of our Reformed biblical worldview, has revived my hope again and given me strength to continue on where God has placed me for now."

Martin Dam, pastor of Maranatha CRC in York, Ontario, wrote:

"Seeing Nicaraguans develop a strong love for Jesus Christ and a real commitment to serving Christ in every area of life reminded me that this 'reformed worldview' is not dead. I also witnessed the great things that are happening in Christian schools in Nicaragua. And seeing Christian organizations and missionaries from different backgrounds and with slightly different theology putting that theology aside and working together to transform the world was a wonderful thing to experience."

Dale Melenberg, pastor of Maranatha CRC in Calgary, Alberta, wrote:

"What I discovered during my time in Nicaragua was that our presence spoke louder than our presents! The fact that we did not just send money to buy supplies, but that we came to help implement those supplies was of great encouragement to the Nicaraguans. I further determined that a successful mission team requires a solid relationship with a well-planted missionary – WWCS is connected! They made the practical pieces look easy."

Rich de Lange, pastor of Aylmer CRC, Ontario, wrote:

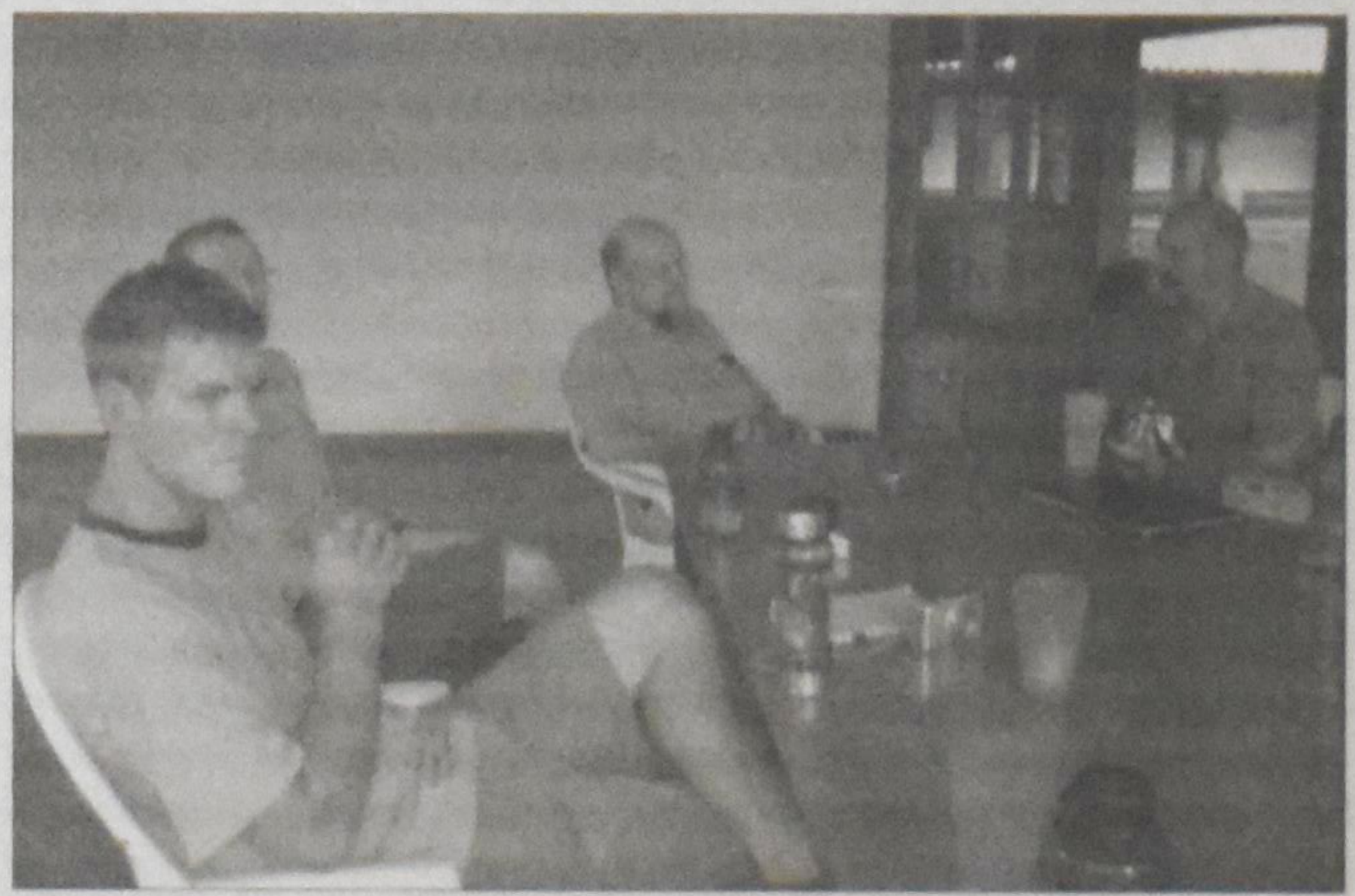
"I was so proud of the people of Nicaragua who work at the Nehemiah Center, to hear how they have embraced the vision of Christian education that helps children form a biblical worldview, which helps them to become members of society that live for Jesus in all of life. They seemed to be more serious about passing on this vision than many Christian schools in North America….

The best laugh of the week came when we were sitting around on Monday night and one of us noticed that there was a chicken head in a pot of rice and beans on the stove in the kitchen. We wondered if maybe we were looking at one of our meals for the next day – we couldn't believe it. About an hour later, we were relieved to learn that it was dog food!"

Kevin Te Brake, pastor of First CRC in Kingston, Ontario, wrote:

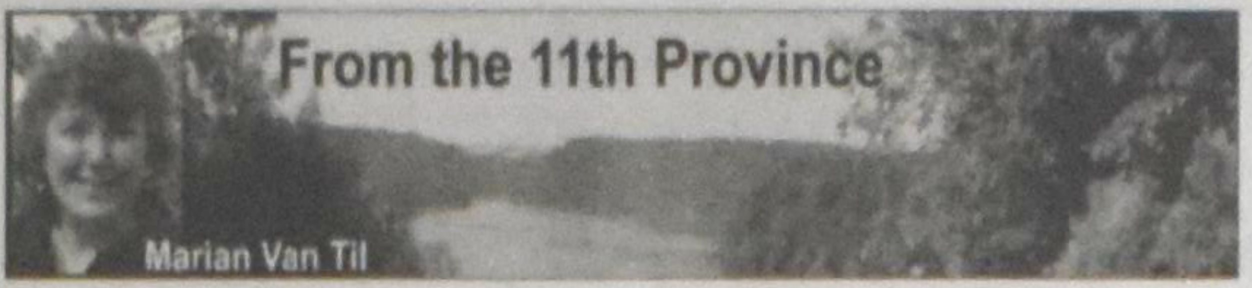
"My perception of Nicaragua is 'broken and beautiful.' We saw much of the countryside and what some of the natural disasters have done to the land. We saw poverty and we were told about the political corruption. But even in the midst all this brokenness, we saw beauty. God revealed himself through the majestic mountains and sparkling lakes. He revealed himself through the beautiful people sharing their biblical worldview and excitement for the Lord. Nicaragua is a broken country, but through the Holy Spirit, the Lord of the universe is transforming it."

See Pastors' HANDS *p.15*



Joel Huyser, founder of the Nehemiah Center in Managua, Nicaragua, meeting with the ministers. Left front Kevin teBrake, First CRC, Kingston, ON, far right is Dale Melenberg, Maranatha CRC Calgary, AB. John Luth, St. Albert CRC, AB in the background.

Reflections



For I will consider my cat Roo

Last month I quoted from the "mad" 18th century English poet Christopher Smart, from his "Rejoice in the Lamb" (*Jubilate Agno*) – the part about his cat, Jeoffrey. The poet saw Jeoffrey, in his created catliness, as "the servant of the Living God, duly and daily serving him." I mentioned two of my own cats (they're my husband's, too, of course, and he's as much of a cat lover as I am) who were napping near me in the winter sunshine as I wrote. On the CC page with my column was the picture of a cat. That was not just any cat; that was one of the nappers, and her name is Roo.

In a column about a year-and-a-half ago I mentioned in passing that, for the only time in our lives, we had taken in a stray. I said I might tell the story some day. That day has arrived. I hope that those of you whose fondness lies with pets other than cats will bear with me and keep reading.

The feline family

Right from the start, there was for me an unexpected and peculiar symbolism about this particular cat and her unexpected arrival; there is what I'll call a metaphorical overlay to her story. What I mean will become clear a little later.

When Roo chose our deck and the doors leading to it as the place to make her raucous stand that late August evening, Ed and I already had five cats. Many sane people (and I like to think Ed and I can be counted in that category) would say five is quite enough. (The cat-haters of the world would say five is five too many.) We began with two, a mother and daughter: Marple, after Agatha Christie's nosy detective Miss Marple, and Delta, whose coloring seemed to conjure that name. They had been my cats before Ed and I were married.

Then one day, as Ed tells it, I was driving by our local Humane Society and went in "unsupervised," a grievous error: within a week we had a third cat. (I didn't *really* have to do much convincing to get Ed to agree.) She was a scrawny, probably abused, yet elegant thing, so "Dancer" seemed to fit her. Some time later, a woman Ed worked with had a cat with kittens that needed homes. We took one of the males, who we named Maple. He was a fit-in-your-coat-pocket, white-and-maple-colored creature, and polydactyl: he had an extra toe on each front foot. That made four.

When Marple got cancer and died at age 13, a few months later, we acquired our one and only Canadian cat from the Humane Society in St. Catharines, an inquisitive tabby we called Digory, after a character in C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. Alas, Maple, meanwhile, lived only three short years, dying of some mysterious liver ailment. We then acquired another male with a Narnian name, Caspian, a large, handsome creature with huge golden eyes, white but wearing a tabby blanket over his back and tail, and a tabby cap on his head. After Delta, too, died of cancer (at age 16), we got a petite calico who had already been named Cassie. We couldn't think of a better name, though we soon started alternating that with "Peeve" (our pet Peeve), as she turned out to be quite vocally opinionated, most especially on when mealtimes should occur.

Three or so years later I made another unsupervised stop at the Humane Society. And soon we had Keeley, who grew into a big cheerful tabby whose Irish name means "handsome." And so there were five. Then Ed and I mutually agreed that five cats was enough. And so they were.

We had, by then, saved eight felines lives from destruction, from being treated, not like the marvelously created sentient creatures they are, who in their way are "servants of the Living God," but like so much detritus to be tossed out on garbage day.

Since Ed and I have not had the blessing of children we decided early on that we could easily and happily divert some of our attention to rescuing cats. I am, of course, not equating children and cats. But I *am* saying that the care of our cats, and adopting as many as we reasonably can, has become a part of our calling.

Animals and the creation mandate

We take seriously all aspects of what Reformational Christians have called the "Creation mandate." Being good stewards of God's Creation means taking attentive, thankful and loving care of the countless gifts he has embedded into the world for our discovery, pleasure use, gifts that he himself pronounced *good* at Creation. Important among those gifts are the animals, which God himself brought to Adam to name; animals (wild and domestic) whose very lives, and certainly whose well-being (especially now), depend on us human beings.

We *Christians,* of all people, need to take seriously the proper care and valuing of all the animals God created. And when it comes to our pets, we must love them for the wonderful creations they are without either shrugging off all their intelligence and marvelous qualities or turning them into little faux people ("children") who are expected to behave in all kinds of non-animal (anti-normative) ways.

Enter the cat who would be Roo. There weren't, and aren't, any stray cats in our neighborhood. When we occasionally see a cat loose it always has wandered too far, and is someone's pet. One we see now and then is from down the road, a Tom let out regularly to do his rounds. So when a young female cat came mewling piteously at our screened patio doors one August evening, it was very much a surprise (and caused an immediate stir among our resident felines). She surely could tell that there were more of her kind inside, but she took a chance that they couldn't get at her (cats being territorial, a newcomer is not generally accepted kindly without proper introductions). She was emaciated, so much so that her head was too big for her body. Her fur was dull and unwashed. She was a most unlovely creature. And she was not just hungry but starving.

I took in the situation in an instant when I went to see what was causing the ruckus. I opened the door a crack, stepped outside and picked her up. She purred immediately. She was no feral animal, there was no fear. Clearly she had been born in proximity to people. We could only assume they had dumped her, and probably her litter mates too. Ed and I agreed that we would feed her and put her in the garage for the night. I would call a no-kill shelter the next morning to see if we could bring her in.

The shelter couldn't take her; they simply couldn't, they said. Overnight someone had left several mother cats and 24 kittens. We then considered the Humane Society. But they only take "whole" animals for adoption. There, her life would be quickly ended for her, those wielding the needle perhaps (in order to do the job) choosing not to notice her bright eyes, remarkable will to live and amazing resilience. You see, in the meantime I had discovered that the stray had a serious neck wound, deep and open. I could see a tendon.

If we wished her rescued, then, we would have to do it ourselves. We would have to keep her. It would be somewhat costly, initially. She would need serious surgery to remove what turned out to be an abscess in her neck, caused perhaps by a bite from an animal enemy or a nasty encounter with barbed wire. And at about 10 months old, she was also in an early stage of pregnancy, so she would need to be spayed at the same time. (I admit that though she's an *animal*, the thought of aborting a whole litter of already growing kittens made me shudder.)

The 'righteous' care for their animals

How much money one can conscientiously spend on the healthcare of one's pets is (or should be) a serious issue for all Christians who have pets. Doing away with animals, willy nilly, because you don't want to spend money to keep them healthy is a serious moral matter. "A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal," says Proverbs 12:10. But spending hundreds or even thousands to keep terminally ill animals alive a little longer for the owners' sake may be a sin of excess, especially if it means that that money is diverted from family necessities or charitable causes.

We judged that, in this case, spending the money to save Roo was money well spent. We began calling her Roo, short for Kangaroo, because in her starving state her back feet seemed huge, kangaroo-like. (Roo is also one of those kinds of names that can easily morph into other names one can have fun with. Buckaroo and RooLu are the most common.)

Roo came through well, was gradually introduced to the already permanent feline residents, and within a few weeks was running up and down the hall, despite still wearing her clunky Elizabethan collar which prevented her from biting at her neck and belly stitches. She took to Ed immediately. And as time passed, she and Keeley became buddies, she is comfortable around gentle Caspian, is an object of Digory's jealousy, has stayed out of Cassie's way, and ditto for Dancer. But mostly she entertains herself and us. And she's smart. She's a formidable hockey player and will actually return the puck to us (the puck being a blue plastic Pepsi bottle cap or white medicine bottle cap). She loves human contact and rewards us with lavish affection and one of the loudest purrs we've ever heard.

A friend of Aslan's

Now about Roo's symbolic significance. From the start she made me think of C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia.* In Lewis's Narnian universe animals can talk and interact with people, and, after The Last Battle, that universe is a kind of glorious picture of the New Earth. Aslan is the lion who is a symbol of Christ, who saves that world. Not that Lewis exactly equates Aslan with Christ, or that Narnia is a parable with direct one-to-one correspondence to our world. Lewis put it something like this: if a world like Narnia existed, then Aslan would be for Narnia what Christ is for us and the world we experience. If Roo lived in Narnia, she would have been adopted by Aslan, and she would know of belonging to him.

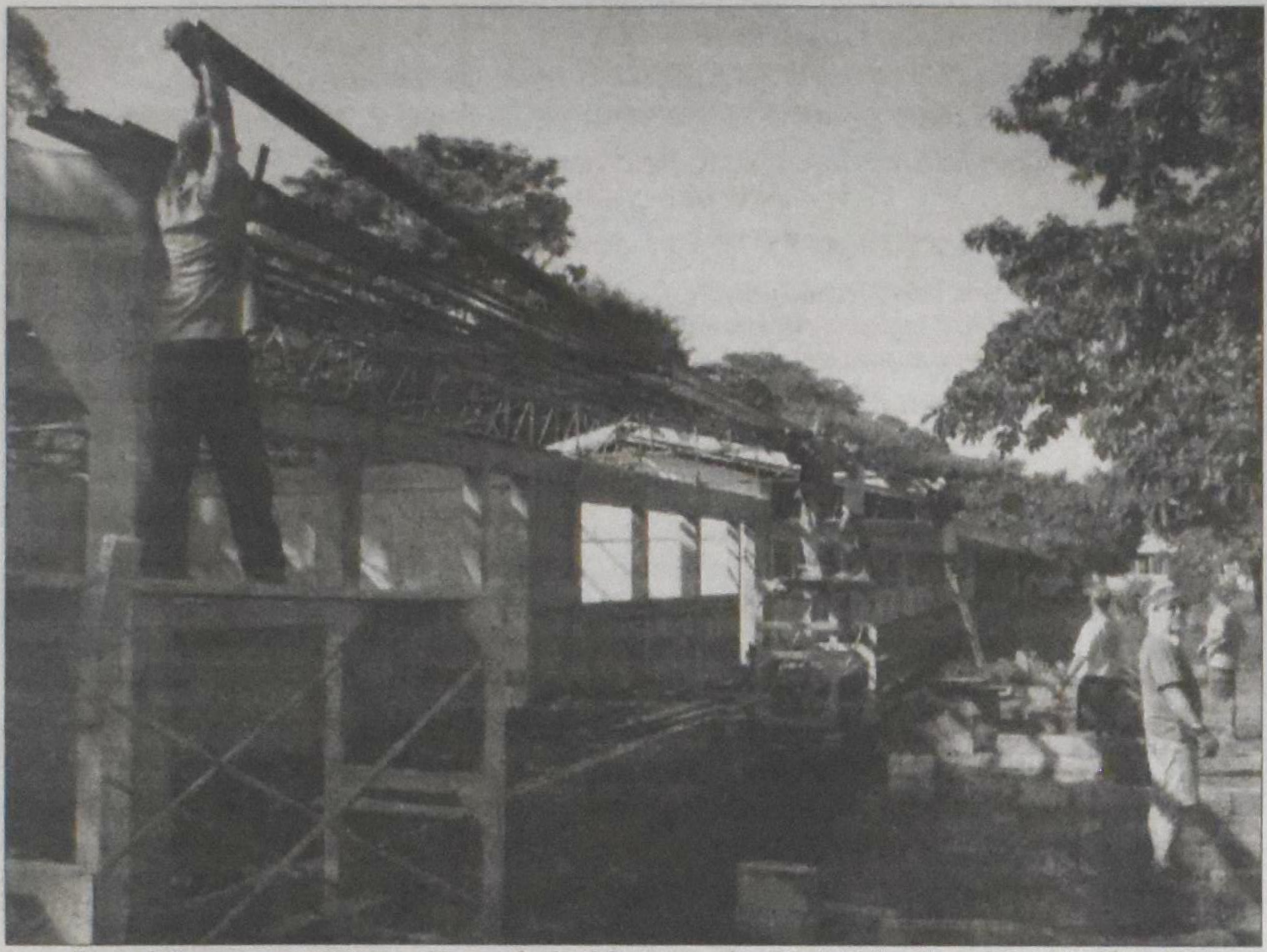
Roo showed up entirely unexpectedly, and Ed and I completely unexpectedly but happily took her in and saved her. Our rescue of her allowed her to become the playful and happy cat God created cats to me. While we literally saved her from death, she, meanwhile, became, in her cat way, a wonderful example of contentment (and I would dare say a kind of gratitude to us) for our turning her life around. She's an object lesson in near complete trust of her "saviors."

I've been thinking a lot of late about the necessity of complete trust in God. There's a constant discipline in Scripture and unceasing prayer for the Spirit's aid that are a part of achieving that unerring confidence in God for all things, so that we are anxious in *nothing*, and in *all* things are thankful.

The Stray has a home. And so do we who trust our God and Savior in, and for, all things. In Roo's complete reliance on us for her food and care, this little cat is an ongoing reminder that we descendants of fallen Adam are also heirs of Christ's Kingdom. We've been rescued and given all we need. And there's even more to come. God has prepared for us more than we could ever ask or imagine.

Marian Van Til worked for Christian Courier *from 1984-2000. She now lives in Youngstown, NY. She may be contacted by email at: mvantil@roadrunner.com or via her website: www.wordpowerpublishing.com*

Pastors' HANDS ...continued from p. 13



Locals and Pastors putting on the roof of addition to the High School at the Nehemiah Center

Comments from observers:

Joel Huyser, Director of the Nehemiah Center in Managua, Nicaragua, had this to say:

"In October, we had the opportunity to host a Canadian Pastors' HANDS Team. Unlike customary HANDS teams, this one did not come with the primary purpose of doing construction. Instead, the pastors came to learn what God is doing in Nicaragua through Worldwide Christian Schools and the other eight organizations that work together as part of the Nehemiah Center. For us it was exciting to be able to share some of the ministry principles that God has been teaching us as we work to rebuild the broken city walls of Nicaragua. We hope that the enriching interchange we enjoyed with the pastors will help build mission vision in Canadian churches, not only for ministry in Nicaragua but also in their own backyards."

Nathan Boersema, Teams Coordinator for Worldwide Christian Schools in Nicaragua, shared the following reflections on the team:

"We had the privilege of hosting the first Pastors' HANDS team for one week here in Nicaragua. We had a wonderful time with this team. We spent the first two days of the pastor's time in Nicaragua telling them about the country, its history and the current situation Christian schools find themselves in. After some down time over the weekend, during which the pastors toured this beautiful country, the team rolled up their sleeves and got to work helping us with a couple of our school projects. The team spent two days helping with the construction of two classrooms at Nicaragua Christian Academy Nejapa and one day helping with the construction of a grade four classroom at Azarias Christian School. The schools were very grateful for the hard work of this team and the financial contributions to the construction of these three classrooms. The team also helped with a project at the Nehemiah Center's office building, a structure that exists due to the collaborative efforts of volunteers and donors and which is the headquarters for nine Christian organizations united to transform and rebuild Nicaragua based on a biblical view of transformation. The team was very interested when learning about the work being done in Christian schools in Nicaragua and were a real blessing to the ministry here."

Stay tuned for more information about how your Pastor can participate in the annual Pastor's HANDS Team. For more information, please call Worldwide Christian Schools-Canada at 866-360-4274 or visit us online at www.wwcs.org

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Classifieds

Anniversaries

St Thomas, Ontario

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JAN AND WILHELMINA VANDERGEEST nee Speelman

will celebrate their **55th Wedding Anniversary** on Friday, March 14, 2008

May God continue to bless and lead them.

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William Vandergeest, *Toronto*
Anne & Maurice Veldhuis, *Drayton*
and all 12 grandchildren.

Correspondence: J. & W. Vandergeest
106 Fairview Ave, St Thomas ON N5R 4X6

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Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Psalm 90:1

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It is our prayer that the LORD will continue to be their strength and guide for years to come.

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Miranda, Claire, Timothy, Mark, Wesley
Chris & Hilda Niezen
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Obituary

Randwijk, Gelderland March 24, 1917 — Ottawa, Ontario January 7, 2008

Deut. 33:27
The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath you are his everlasting arms.

COBY (Jacoba Catharina) KUIPER KARREMAN (nee van de Wal)

fell asleep in the arms of her Lord and Saviour.

She was preceded in death by
her first husband, Menno Kuiper, in 1981 and
her second husband, Dirk Karreman, in 1997.

Beloved mother of
Christina & Gerald Pleizier, *Ottawa*
Elske Kuiper, *Toronto*
Al & the late Ghislaine Kuiper, *Ottawa*
Cathy & Dirk Van Starkenburg, *Micksburg*
Elisabeth Kuiper & Pierre Lefort, *Perth*
Also beloved by 8 grandchildren
& 2 great-grandchildren.

The funeral service was held at Calvin CRC, Ottawa, ON, on January 11, 2008, led by Rev. K.Gehrels

Correspondence address: C. Pleizier
3580 Birchtree Cres, Navan ON K4B 1N6

Event

25th Anniversary Concert

March 29 – 7:30 p.m.
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Tamara DeWaard: tamarakoens@hotmail.com
or Ron Hosmar: youthpastor@calvincrc.ca.

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Events

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For more information visit www.cnfa.ca or contact Jack Van der Laan 905 332 7000 or Hans Kloet 905 336 7184

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Email: paul@ocschool.org
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Vision and church profile will be provided upon request.

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Registration deadline: March 20/08.
Cost: $20, group rates available.

IN the GO Missions Conference

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Dordt College

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Dordt College invites applications and inquiries for four position openings in the area of Student Services including:

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– one full-time, 12-month position is available
International & Intercultural Affairs Coordinator
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Candidates with a strong commitment to a Reformed, biblical faith and the mission of Dordt College, and an interest in working with students, faculty and staff on a Christian campus should send a cover letter and resume to Susan Droog, Director of Human Resources, Dordt College, 498 Fourth Ave. NE, Sioux Center, IA 51250. Phone (712) 722-6011. Fax (712) 722-1198. E-mail: kharmel@dordt.edu. A review of applications received will begin immediately and continue until the position is filled. Please contact us if you have questions about any of these positions. We will be happy to send you more complete details.

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Email: kharmel@dordt.edu
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August, 2008

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Communication
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Economics
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Teach introductory and advanced courses.

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Visual Arts
Teach introductory and upper level graphic design and animation, work with InDesign, Illustrator, Photoshop and After Effects; teach in the art history sequence, possible internship supervision or photography.

To learn more about a position and receive application materials, qualified persons committed to a Reformed, biblical perspective and educational philosophy are encouraged to send a letter of interest and curriculum vita/resume to:

Dr. Rockne McCarthy
Vice President for Academic Affairs
Dordt College
498 4th Ave. NE
Sioux Center, IA 51250-1697

Facsimile: 712 722-1198
E-mail: vpaa@dordt.edu
Web site: www.dordt.edu/offices/academic_affairs

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Events/Advertising

CALENDAR OF EVENTS - 2008

March 1 Annual Inter-Classis Safe Church Abuse Prevention Response Training. Location: **Waterloo** CRC, Waterloo ON To register call/email Atie Ott or online Phone: 519-576-0965 Email: wmott@uwaterloo.ca Web: www.ece.uwaterloo.ca/~wmott/scc

March 8 Aylmer Christian Reformed Church - Ambassadors Male Chorus in concert - 8 p.m.

March 13 Noon-hour Organ Recital, Jonathan Oldengarm organist, at St. Paul's Anglican Church, 227 Bloor St. East, **Toronto**. Free admission. Program will feature works by Franck, Guillou, and Reger. For more information call: 416-961-8116. Website: www.oldengarm.com.

March 15 Jarvis Christian Reformed Church - Ambassadors Male Chorus in concert - 7:30 p.m.

March 29 - Hamilton - 25th Anniversary Concert by the 130 voice of the Hosanna Choir at Hamilton Place at 7:30 p.m. Guests inlcude the Mattaniah Male Choir, Liselotte Rokyta – panflute and many others. All under the direction of Herman den Hollander. Tickets are $10 and $15, available at ticketmaster* outlets, CoppsColliseum Box office,ticketmaster.ca* or charge by phone at 905-527-7666,416-870-8000*(*convenience fee at ticketmaster)or contact the choir at 905-628-1211visit www.hosanna-choir.org

March 29 Missions Conference at Bethel CRC, **Waterdown** for local church leaders, missions advocates, and short term missions participants. For registration information visit Christian Reformed World Missions at www.crwm.org or contact John & Margaret den Otter 905-331-3205 or jdenotter@cogeco.ca

April 12 Annual Festival of Praise – Rehoboth United Reformed Church opposite HDCH, **Hamilton** 7:30 p.m. – 4 male choirs participating: Ambassadors; The Choraliers; Collegium Musicum and The Crusaders. For info or tickets: vaneekae@sympatico.ca or p-b.degroot@sympatico.ca or go www.schuurman.ca/ambassadors.htm Tickets $12 and $10 fo seniors.

April 13 Dutch Service will be held in the **Ancaster** Christian Reformed Church at 3:00 p.m. Rev. Henry R. DeBolster will be preaching.

April 19, 20 Maranatha CRC, **Cambridge** 50th anniversary. Celebrations and special events will be held on Saturday April 19 at 7 p.m. and Sunday April 20 during the 10 a.m. service.

May 2-4 Marriage encounter weekend in **London**, ON. For more information or to register on-line, go to **www.reformedme.org** or contact Chris & Cindy Otten at 519-393-5163 or by email at Ontario_Registration@reformedme.org

May 3, 5 Friendship day, in **Burlington** sponsored by The Canada Netherlands Friendship Association. For more information visit www.cnfa.ca or contact Jack Van der Laan 905 332 7000 or Hans Kloet 905 336 7184. See details page 16.

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News

Wheat prices hit record high

Ron Scherer

New York – Dressed in his white apron and baker's hat, Jose Espinal puts the finishing touches on a chicken pot pie that will be sold to customers of Cucina & Co. later in the day. He carefully places a crust on the pie and crimps the top and bottom together.

But to make the dough for about 300 pies, Mr. Espinal, the pastry chef, used 22 pounds of flour – an item that the store knows will soon be rising in price.

"I'm expecting it this week," says Michael Salmon, director of operations of Cucina, which is in Macy's in Manhattan. "Maybe 20 or 30 percent."

Why the increase? The prime ingredient in flour is wheat, which these days is acting more like oil – rising sharply on commodities exchanges. On Feb. 25, the price of March spring wheat on the Minneapolis Grain Exchange shot up to $24 a bushel, the highest price ever. Within the past month, the price of some types of wheat has risen over 90 percent. Already, agricultural experts say, it's getting hard to find the type of wheat used to make pasta, noodles, pizza, and bagels.

"Supplies of some types of wheat will be extremely tight," says economist William Lapp, president of Advanced Economic Solutions in Omaha, Neb. "I don't think we'll see physical bread lines, but supplies will be just tight."

Companies that use wheat say they are overwhelmed by the sharp rise and have little choice but to pass on at least part of the increase to consumers. Flour manufacturers, for example, are raising prices by at least 30 percent or more. Since the beginning of the year, bread in the supermarket has risen anywhere from 10 to 30 cents a loaf.

Overall, in January, consumer food prices were up 4.9 percent in comparison with January 2007. Cereal and baked goods rose 5.5 percent. Some items went up even more: Dairy products increased 12.8 percent and fruits and vegetables 6.1 percent.

Rising food prices, combined with escalating energy prices and falling home prices, are putting a squeeze on consumers' pocketbooks. A drop in discretionary spending is one reason that economists are increasingly worried about the economy moving into a recession.

Rising food prices also make it difficult for the Federal Reserve, which has to balance rising inflation with a slowing economy.

Yet despite the recent rise in food prices, over a longer period of time, spending on food as a percentage of household income has been declining, points out Michael Rizzo, senior economist at the American Institute for Economic Research (AIER) in Great Barrington, Mass. For example, in 1970, food represented 19.3 percent of household expenditures. By 2006, it had shrunk to 12.6 percent.

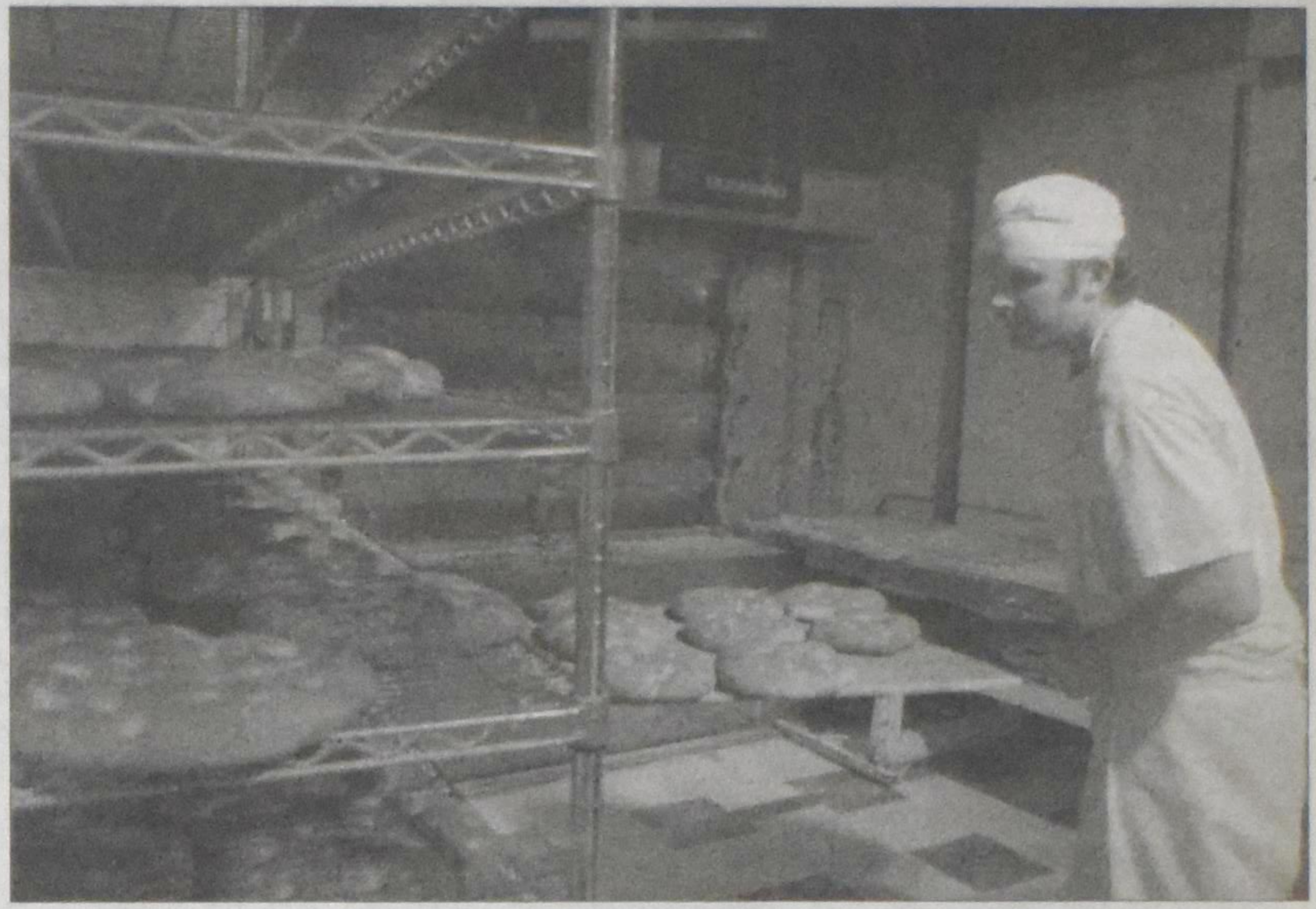
"One of the reasons for the decline is the huge increase in productivity: It's become less expensive for the farmer to produce food," he says. "Even among the poorest, the share of their budget going to food purchases is at an all-time low."

Still, there is no doubt that over the short term, products made with wheat will rise in price. Because of the weak dollar and poor harvests abroad, exports of US wheat are up 30 percent this year. It hasn't helped that some parts of Kansas and Oklahoma have had drought conditions. At the same time, some farmers have shifted crops from wheat to corn and soybeans to take advantage of demand for biofuels.

"This has been a very unique year," says Steve Merçer, a spokesman for US Wheat Associates, which promotes American exports of the grain.

In fact, US stocks of wheat are now at their lowest level in 60 years. By the time the June harvest of spring wheat begins, there will be 27 days of wheat left in storage, estimates the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). (The normal supply is three months.)

"We think it's a dire situation," says Lee Sanders, senior vice president for government relations for the American Bakers Association, a lobbying group, which has asked its members to brief members of Congress on March 12. The group has also set up meetings with Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer and the White House. Their goal is to free up land that has been put aside for conservation purposes.



While Washington debates, the impact of rising wheat prices is already being felt on many levels. Wegmans, a grocery chain based in Rochester, N.Y., says it has raised prices on packaged breads from 10 to 50 cents. Prices have also gone up on cakes mixes, crackers, cookies, and cereal. "We have absorbed some price increases, but at a point, you have to charge more," says Jo Natale, a spokeswoman for the grocer.

The flour that consumers use to do their own baking is also going up in price. Last October, King Arthur Flour, a producer of premium flour based in Norwich, Vt., raised prices by 12 percent. It just announced another price increase – of 46 percent – for grocery stores and retailers effective April 1. It has tried to explain the price hikes to its customers on its website.

"My biggest worry is the consumer," says Michael Bittel, the company's general manager. "It will take three years of top-notch crops that exceed demand and refill stocks."

Some bakeries say they're having trouble getting some products. In Brookline, Mass., the Clear Flour Bakery has worked hard to introduce whole-grain German rye bread to its customers. But now, it can't get hold of the rye.

"It's frustrating after building up the market that for three weeks in a row, we have not had it," says Abe Faber, co-owner of the bakery and a board member of the Bread Bakers Guild of America.

Wheat growers say the best cure for high prices is ... high prices, since they will prompt farmers to plant more wheat. Last week, the USDA estimated that would happen in the next growing season.

Unfortunately, many US farmers won't benefit from the current prices since they won't have a crop until June or July. "The vast majority have not been able to benefit," says John Thaemert, president of the National Association of Wheat Growers and also a farmer in Sylvan Grove, Kan.

He ticks off how the farmer has been hit by higher energy costs and fertilizer expenses. "We've had seven years of drought, people questioning my sanity while we're out here busting our buns," he says. "Now, there is the possibility of healing some of the hurt, paying some bills, and hopefully bringing another generation into farming."

In his part of Kansas, there has been good moisture this winter. He hopes to do all he can to produce wheat for the markets. "We've had some rain and a foot of snow. It was just beautiful," he says.

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